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APRIL 16, 2018

# THE NEW YORKER



TOM GAULD







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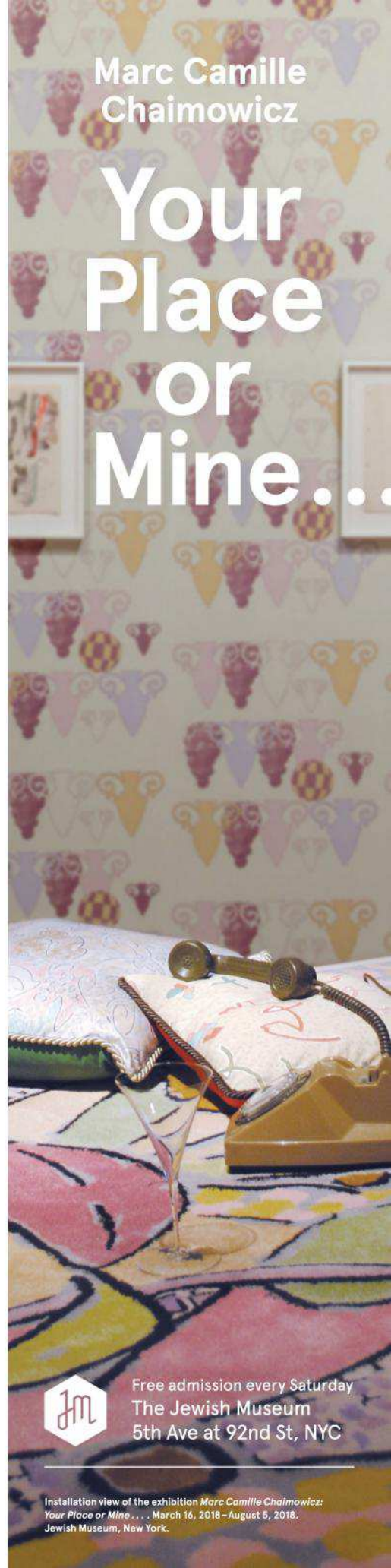
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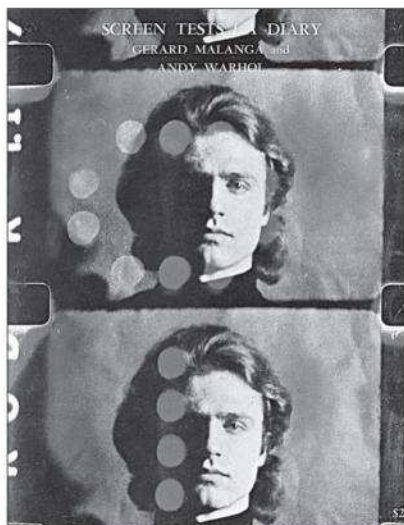
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Charles Barsotti, March 21, 2011

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## CONTRIBUTORS

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**Louisa Thomas** (*"Game Plan,"* p. 30), a contributing writer for the magazine, is the author of "Louisa: The Extraordinary Life of Mrs. Adams," a biography of the wife of John Quincy Adams.

**Junot Díaz** (*"The Silence,"* p. 24) has written several books, including the short-story collection "This Is How You Lose Her." His picture book, "Island-born," came out in March.

**Andrew Marantz** (*Comment,* p. 19), a staff writer, is working on a book about politics and new media.

**Forrest Gander** (*Poem,* p. 43) is the author of "Core Samples from the World." His latest poetry collection, "Be With," comes out in August.

**Vinson Cunningham** (*Books,* p. 70) has been a staff writer since 2016.

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**Tom Gauld** (*Cover*) has written and illustrated several books, including "Baking with Kafka," a collection of literary humor cartoons.

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**Amy Woolard** (*Poem,* p. 36) is a writer and a legal-aid attorney living in Charlottesville, Virginia. Her forthcoming debut poetry collection, "Neck of the Woods," received the 2018 Alice James Award.

**Edward Steed** (*Comic Strip,* p. 44) has been contributing cartoons to the magazine since 2013.

**James Wood** (*Books,* p. 74) teaches at Harvard University. "Upstate," his latest novel, comes out in June.

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## THE MAIL

### PRUITT VS. THE E.P.A.

Margaret Talbot's article about Scott Pruitt paints a scathing picture of his assault on the Environmental Protection Agency ("Dirty Politics," April 2nd). I was the first, and then the fifth, administrator of the agency. The environment is far healthier today than it was forty-seven years ago, when the E.P.A. was created, precisely because of the science-based standards that the agency implemented. Pruitt is systematically attacking both the E.P.A.'s budget and its scientific framework. If he is successful, the very reason for the E.P.A.'s creation—illness and disease from pollution—will reëmerge, and we will have to start from square one. The country must challenge the Trump Administration's war on science. Otherwise, as a result of actions taken by Pruitt and this Administration, the uncontrolled pollution that we have greatly reduced in the past five decades will return.

*William D. Ruckelshaus*  
*Seattle, Wash.*

Pruitt is not, as he claims, an E.P.A. originalist. Nor is he a science-denying Neanderthal. He is merely a servant to wealthy corporate interests. He is not there to protect the country's clean air. He does not care about the long-term damage that a mountaintop mining operation can do to our drinking-water supplies and to our fishing habitats. He is not looking out for the well-being of future generations. Science is knowledge, and Pruitt's denial of knowledge makes him unfit for government service. It is also the reason that career scientists are overwhelmingly abandoning the E.P.A. under his leadership. Pruitt did not fight Trump's proposed twenty-five-per-cent cut to the E.P.A.'s budget. He says that he is sticking to "traditional" priorities, such as cleaning up Superfund sites, but he has been co-opted by the very industries that he is responsible for regulating. This cleanup uses current taxpayer money to remedy past damage that should have been cor-

rected by the offending private industries. Essentially, Pruitt wants to privatize profits from businesses while socializing their expenses. Unfortunately, that attitude will only produce new Superfund sites for future taxpayers to deal with.

*Richard Dickinson*  
*Richmond Hill, Ga.*

I wept after reading Talbot's article about Pruitt's dismemberment of the E.P.A. My life's work has been environmental protection. In the nineteen-sixties, I helped Interior Secretary Stewart Udall define the scope of a new approach to conservation, which included both cities and wild places. Then, as the White House assistant for conservation and beautification, I helped the Johnson Administration create new national parks, like the North Cascades and Redwood, and bring more trees and parks to neighborhoods in cities like Washington, D.C. In the eighties, I worked with the E.P.A. to develop a policy that required the agency to solicit balanced participation from industries, environmental organizations, and local citizens. For many years since, my work has focussed on how citizens and officials alike can be good neighbors to great rivers. Now, at the age of eighty-one, I have neither the strength nor the years ahead to fight against the mindless damage that is being done to our country—and to our planet—by Pruitt, Ryan Zinke, and their colleagues in the Trump Administration. Many of the hard-won achievements of my life are in tatters. Although I am distraught, I know that thousands of well-educated, committed individuals will pick up the pieces and rebuild. Because they have to.

*Sharon F. Francis*  
*Charlestown, N.H.*

•

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APRIL 11 – 17, 2018

# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



The exhibition **“Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-85,”** opening at the Brooklyn Museum on April 13, surveys a surge of experimentation across fifteen countries. One of the show’s themes—resisting oppression—may feel attuned to the current political climate in the United States. Among some hundred and twenty participants is Liliana Porter, who photographed “Untitled (Hands and Triangle),” above, in 1973, nine years after she left her native Argentina for New York City, where she still lives.



# MOVIES

## NOW PLAYING

### Blockers

The simple setup of this teen-centric comedy, directed by Kay Cannon, yields clever and hearty complications. Three suburban girls—friends since first grade, now high-school seniors—make a pact to lose their virginity on prom night; their parents get wind of the scheme and crash the party to thwart it. The confident Julie (Kathryn Newton) has a long-term boyfriend (Graham Phillips), the adventuresome Kayla (Geraldine Viswanathan) chooses a candidate (Miles Robbins) on a whim, and Sam (Gideon Adlon) is attracted to another girl (Ramona Young) but hasn't come out, and goes to the prom with a boy (Jimmy Bellinger). A boatload of parents and guardians get pulled into the action, but the principal trio is Julie's mother (Leslie Mann), Kayla's father (John Cena), and Sam's father (Ike Barinholtz), who bear their own emotional baggage and give the movie its comedic energy. There's plenty of rowdy sexual humor (Cena's athletic-coach character is the butt of much of it) that plays like counterpoint to the girls' exuberant, earnest striving toward maturity. The absurdity of the parents' intervention gets symbolic weight from the deftly destructive physical comedy that they have to endure. With Gary Cole and Gina Gershon, as randy neighbors.—*Richard Brody* (In wide release.)

### Chappaquiddick

A perfunctory, only mildly absorbing historical drama, about the 1969 incident in which Senator Edward Kennedy (played by Jason Clarke) left a party with his late brother Robert's former staff member Mary Jo Kopechne (Kate Mara) and drove his car off a bridge, resulting in her death. The drama, written by Taylor Allen and Andrew Logan and directed by John Curran, details what Kennedy did that night and how he handled the inevitable legal and public-relations problems in the week that followed. The answer: badly. The story is centered on the conflict between Kennedy's conscience—embodied and emboldened by his cousin Joe Gargan (Ed Helms)—and his self-interest, represented and advanced by the family patriarch, Joe Kennedy (Bruce Dern). Ailing and disabled but still ferocious, Joe puts Ted in the hands of the family's high-powered fixers, including Robert McNamara (Clancy Brown), who pull mighty strings to keep him out of jail and in the Senate, even as the Senator himself vacillates and blunders. But the sketches of Kennedy-family tensions and loyalties are thin and simplistic; the action rushes by with little insight or context.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

### Gemini

Heather (Zoë Kravitz) is a movie star living in Los Angeles, and Jill (Lola Kirke) is her personal assistant—a job whose limits are weirdly hard to define. The two women seem almost inseparable; Aaron Katz's film hangs out with them over the course of a night, as they drive around town, have drinks, see friends, and fend off paparazzi. The morning brings a corpse, and the stirrings of a serious mystery, yet Katz is never in a hurry, even as the plot quickens, and the mood remains cool, amused, and wholly resistant to hysteria. Even the detective (John Cho) who investigates the death seems to have time on

his hands, though he's not the only one to hunt for clues. Jill, too, becomes something of a sleuth, not unlike the heroines of David Lynch's "Mulholland Drive" (2001). It doesn't much matter that the solution, when it arrives, is fairly unconvincing. What matters is Jill herself, who, in Kirke's composed performance, remains resolutely unglamorous and hard to fathom. With Nelson Franklin, as a film director who appears to have lost every trace of human warmth.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 4/2/18.) (In limited release.)

### Jeannette

Bruno Dumont depicts the childhood of Joan of Arc—her early days of charity and despair in a war-ravaged region, her religious calling, and her decision to lead the French into battle against the English occupiers—as a starkly inventive, ecstatically energetic rock opera, filmed on location in raw and rustic landscapes. At the age of eight, Joan—called Jeannette (played by Lise Leplat Prudhomme)—summons a nun named Gervaise (played by the identical twins Aline and Elise Charles) to discuss faith and justice, and their extended disputations are punctuated by acrobatics and guitar-fueled hair-whipping. Jeannette is visited by Sts. Catherine, Margaret, and Michael, who appear to her in suspended animation in glowing sunlight above a sparkling stream and rouse her to action. Then, the teen-age Joan (Jeanne Voisin) prepares to run away from home and save France. The characters, filmed with a whirling and gyrating camera, sing and dance to the music of Igorrr, which ranges from power ballads to hip-hop, in choreography by Philippe Decouflé which exalts the awkward grace of daily gestures. Dumont films Joan's spiritual conflicts and confrontations with playful exuberance but avoids frivolity; the ardent actors infuse Joan's spirit of revolt with the eternal passions of youth. In French.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

### The Killers

The director Don Siegel's Technicolor film noir, from 1964—very loosely based on Ernest Hemingway's darkly comic story of death and its dealers—displays the seamy side of life in sharp graphic lines. It's centered on a pair of sardonically brutal hit men (Lee Marvin and Clu Gulager) who pursue their work with a sinister glee. After gunning down their target, a race-car driver (John Cassavetes), they begin to suspect that there's big money at stake, and they set out to get it. Their quest takes them to Miami, New Orleans, and Los Angeles; the story of a million missing dollars is revealed in flashbacks that involve a femme fatale (Angie Dickinson) and her sugar daddy (Ronald Reagan, in his last movie role), a twisted love affair, and a heist gone awry. As in Hemingway's story, the killers are a couple of cutups; Gulager and Marvin bring a weird and wicked sense of humor to the hit men's dirty work. Siegel's terse, seething, and stylish direction glows with the blank radiance of sheet metal in sunlight; the movie's bright primary colors and glossy luxuries are imbued with menace, and its luminous delights convey a terrifyingly cold world view.—*R.B.* (Quad Cinema, April 11.)

### Lean on Pete

In his previous film, "45 Years" (2015), the British director Andrew Haigh explored the later stages of a marriage. Now, shifting from rural England to

Oregon, but sustaining the air of sorrow, he turns to a young man on the brink of adulthood. Charley Thompson (Charlie Plummer), who lacks a mother and lives with his feckless father (Travis Fimmel), is only in his mid-teens, yet his lean and solemn features and his skinny frame suggest that he has already seen and suffered enough. In the wake of a crisis, he moves out and flees, hooking up with a grumpy horse trainer named Del (Steve Buscemi), who needs a helper. The sole source of joy in Charley's life is Lean on Pete (or Pete for short), one of Del's horses, who is nearing the end of his racing days, and the movie, marked by a helpless sense of drift, measures the deepening bond between the horse and the kid. Haigh is no sentimentalist, and happy endings, you soon realize, will be in short supply. Buscemi seems misplaced in this environment, as does Chloë Sevigny, in the role of a jockey, but Plummer's grave presence holds the story tight.—*A.L.* (4/9/18) (In limited release.)

### Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters

Paul Schrader's cinematic collage of the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima's life and work, from 1985, is one of the most gorgeous and sophisticated portraits of an artist ever put on film. Schrader shows art imitating life and vice versa, while ultimately focussing on how this complicated dramatist and novelist consciously strove to unite the two. Bisexual, sadomasochistic, and increasingly devoted to Japan's warrior codes and feudal glories, Mishima bends both his words and his flesh to the power of his imagination; he becomes a muscleman and the commander of his own military squadron, and Schrader gives every aspect of Mishima's quest an apt aesthetic charge. He juggles a hyperrealistic account of Mishima's final day on earth and black-and-white scenes largely drawn from his autobiographical first novel, "Confessions of a Mask," with gloriously stagy dramatizations of scenes from three of his novels. Mishima resolves his search for an impossible harmony of art, life, and politics in a lunatic act of public rebellion followed by ritual suicide. His story has enormous vitality, and this movie, a work of art in its own right, is a beauty. In Japanese and English.—*Michael Sragow* (Quad Cinema, April 15, and streaming.)

### Ready Player One

Steven Spielberg goes back to the future, forward to the past, and in any other direction that he likes. The year is 2045, and the setting is a semi-slum in Columbus, Ohio, where Wade Watts (Tye Sheridan), like everybody else, devotes as much time as possible to life in the Oasis. This is an online world, created by a guru named Halliday (Mark Rylance), who has since passed away, though he still exists in digital form. The Oasis is a paradise of pop culture, littered with offcuts of old movies, computer games, and TV shows. Most of them hail from the later nineteen-seventies and eighties—the period, that is, in which Spielberg established his cultural dominance. Once in the virtual zone, Wade enrolls in a road race and other challenges with a view to winning a powerful prize: control of the Oasis itself. He is joined in his quest by friendly rivals, such as Art3mis (Olivia Cooke), and corporate foes, like Nolan Sorrento (Ben Mendelsohn at his meanest), all of them in the guise of avatars. The movie repeatedly astounds, as you would expect from Spielberg; more surprising, and less welcome, is the mildness of its emotional punch.—*A.L.* (4/9/18) (In wide release.)

### Street of Shame

The shrill music over the opening credits of Kenji Mizoguchi's final film, from 1956, evokes the harsh



view of modern life that follows. The drama is centered on a Tokyo brothel where the prostitutes cling desperately to their dreams. One wants to move in with her grown son, another wants to marry her steady john, a third is trying to make a home for her unemployed husband and their newborn, and a fourth wants to fleece enough clients to buy a respectable business. Only a newcomer, Michiko (Machiko Kyo), known as Mickey and thoroughly Westernized (having been kept by a G.I. during the postwar occupation), maintains a clear view of the miserable fate of these women and of all Japanese women. With a quasi-Brechtian ferocity, Mizoguchi likens marriage to free prostitution with housework thrown in, sees capitalism as an official form of whoring, and considers the red-light district to be the corrupt government's substitute for social programs. For his last film, he sharpens his style to confront a coarsened world in which his earlier lyricism has little place. In Japanese.—R.B. (*MOMA, April 16, and streaming.*)

### Where Is Kyra?

Unemployed and looking for work, Kyra (Michelle Pfeiffer) lives with her elderly and ailing mother, Ruth (Suzanne Shepherd), in a dark apartment in a rumpled Brooklyn neighborhood. Kyra meets a struggling cabdriver named Doug (Kiefer Sutherland) in a nearby bar, and they begin a relationship. But Kyra's situation doesn't improve; when Ruth dies, Kyra is left without an income, and, in danger of being evicted from her apartment, she impersonates her late mother and cashes her pension and disability checks. Andrew Dosunmu directs this drama with obvious empathy but little curiosity; working with the extraordinary cinematographer Bradford Young, he frames the action in extended static takes, sunk in sepulchral shadows, that mainly keep at a restrained distance from the characters. The script, by Darci Picoult, does little to illuminate thoughts, plans, and lives; the banal dialogue is delivered at a slow and pause-riddled pace, as if to infuse it with meaning and emotion that it doesn't contain. Though the on-location filming is moody and evocative, the action plays like the bare-bones sketch of a drama that's still waiting to be developed.—R.B. (*In wide release.*)

### Zama

The bureaucratic and intimate frustrations of a Spanish magistrate in a remote Argentinean outpost in the eighteenth century furnish the director Lucrecia Martel's new film with rarefied passions and inspire a highly original style to match. The middle-aged official, Diego de Zama (Daniel Giménez Cacho), is posted far from his wife and children, and his relentless requests for a transfer are mocked and ignored by local governors. One young subordinate openly defies him; another, a writer, troubles his conscience. He hears from Spanish settlers who've murdered the indigenous population and now lack slaves; an aristocratic woman seeks his help and toys with his affections. With a dreamlike obliviousness, Zama observes and colludes in the brutal injustices on which the colonial regime runs. Then, in despair, he volunteers for a dangerous mission in pursuit of bandits. Adapting a novel by Antonio Di Benedetto, Martel creates a cinema of dialectical tensions; the bustling activity of offices and drawing rooms veers outside the frame while voices of authority and complaint assail the hero with a bewildering tangle of conflicting demands and desires. The dramatic fusion of physical and administrative power captures nothing less than the bloody forging of modernity. In Spanish.—R.B. (*In limited release.*)





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# ART

## MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

### Met Breuer

#### "Like Life: Sculpture, Color, and the Body"

This is a mind-blowing show, hypercharged with sensation and glutted with instruction. You may be torn between praising it as visionary (and also a great deal of fun, what with entertainments including a voluble animatronic savant) and reporting it as a mugging to the taste police. A hundred and twenty-seven almost exclusively European and American renditions of human bodies, from very old to recent and from masterpieces to curios, elaborate the thesis that colored figurative sculpture has been unjustly bastardized ever since the Renaissance canonized a mistake made during its excited revival of antiquity. The whiteness of surviving Greek and Roman marbles, their original polychromy lost, became *de rigueur* for Western three-dimensional figuration in subsequent centuries. Great works in the exhibition range from an anonymous German's "Nellingen Crucifix," from

1430-35, and Donatello's "Bust of Niccolò da Uzzano," from the fourteen-thirties, to contemporary sculptures by Jeff Koons ("Michael Jackson and Bubbles," from 1988) and Charles Ray ("Aluminum Girl," completed in 2003). Crowd-pleasing curiosities include the "Auto-Icon of Jeremy Bentham," from 1832. Sitting on a chair, the realistic wax-faced figure, jauntily clothed and sporting a cane, contains the British philosopher's skeleton. The effect is at once scholarly and populist, like that of a TED talk. *Through July 22.*

### Whitney Museum

#### "Zoe Leonard: Survey"

The American artist's strangely beautiful, unpretentiously intimate, and adamantly political work is the subject of this powerful show, a nuanced selection of photographs, punctuated by rescued-object sculptures and text. Carefully structured, on the museum's fifth floor, in seven parts, the survey includes a hundred-and-four-foot-long collection of vintage postcards of Niagara Falls; color shots of New York's vanished mom-and-pop

shops, printed in the now obsolete dye-transfer process; and a subversively entertaining archive of photographs of Fae Richards, a black lesbian actress from the nineteen-thirties, which is so lushly convincing you'll be shocked to learn it's a fiction. Some of Leonard's subjects go unnoticed because they're mundane, the way nature becomes incidental in cities (eight pictures document trees, resilient survivors that have grown enmeshed with the metal fences around them). Others are rendered invisible when society turns a blind eye. Between 1992 and 1995, Leonard memorialized victims of the AIDS epidemic in the coruscating installation "Strange Fruit," discarded peels of citrus, avocado, and bananas, their bruised skins painstakingly made whole again with sinew, zippers, buttons, and thread. Seen in 2018, the tenderly devotional project assumes new dimensions—a meditation on bodies violated by gun violence and police brutality, and on the redemptive power of love. *Through June 10.*

### American Folk Art Museum

#### "Vestiges & Verse: Notes from the Newfangled Epic"

More than a few self-taught artists have invented grand narratives. One was the Chicago janitor Henry Darger, who became a posthumous legend (he died in 1973) after the discovery of his fifteen-thousand-page illustrated epic, "The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion." Displayed in a long vitrine, it serves as the spine of this arresting show of two hundred and fifty works by twenty-one artists, all consumed for years by their projects. None are storytellers in any conventional sense. Achilles G. Rizzoli, an architectural draftsman in San Francisco by day, made intricate drawings of unbuildable Beaux-Arts buildings. In Minneapolis, Richard Saholt, a veteran of the Second World War, made collages from magazines to convey his mistreatment by Veterans Administration doctors. Agatha Wojciechowsky, who moved to New York as a German-speaking nanny and later became a medium, made drawings she believed were guided by spirits. Paul Laffoley, a onetime grad student at Harvard, who died at the age of eighty, in 2015, believed his diagrammatic paintings were transmitting advice from an extraterrestrial, including how to shift the known universe "into the fifth-dimensional realm." *Through May 27.*

### Frick Collection

#### "Zurbarán's Jacob and His Twelve Sons: Paintings from Auckland Castle"

Francisco de Zurbarán was the second-best painter in seventeenth-century Spain—no disgrace when the champion, his Seville-born near-exact contemporary, happened to be Diego Velázquez, who arguably remains better than anybody, ever. In this room-filling show, thirteen life-size imagined portraits, painted by Zurbarán circa 1640-45, constitute a terrific feat of Baroque storytelling: the movies of their day. Each character has a distinct personality, uniquely posed, costumed, and accessorized, and towering against a bright, clouded sky. All appear in the forty-ninth chapter of Genesis, in which the dying Jacob prophesies the fates of the founders-to-be of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. After nearly four centuries, the canvases sorely need cleaning. The brilliance of their colors has dimmed, notably in passages of brocade and other sumptuous fabrics—a forte of Zurbarán, whose father was a haberdasher. But most of the pictures re-



Three decades into his career, Steve DiBenedetto's paintings (including "Metaphysical Salami," above) look stronger and stranger than ever, at the Derek Eller gallery through April 22.



tain power aplenty. Spend time with them. Their glories bloom slowly, as you register the formal decisions that practically spring the figures from their surfaces into the room with you, and as you ponder, if you will, the stories that they plumb. *Through April 22.*

## GALLERIES—UPTOWN

### Kishio Suga

Black, white, and the tawny hues of bare wood dominate the Japanese artist's geometric abstractions, hybrids of painting and assemblage. Color brings moments of drama. In "Elapsing Zones," tree branches alternate with wooden dowels to create vertical stripes against a blue background. In the more austere "Intersection of Elapsed Factors," the same materials are used to form a giant "X" against celadon. Suga, who is also known for more evanescent and site-specific works, was a key figure of the Mono-ha ("school of things") movement, an aesthetic confluence of Minimalism, land art, and Arte Povera, which emerged in Tokyo in the late nineteen-sixties. The wall-mounted works here, with their subtle optical effects and deft juxtapositions, are durable counterparts to more ephemeral but no less powerful installations, fashioned from stones, plastic sheeting, wire, and wood. *Through April 14. (Blum & Poe, 19 E. 66th St. 212-249-2249.)*

## GALLERIES—CHELSEA

### Barbara Hepworth

As the British modernist sculptor shifted from abstracted figuration to a wholly nonobjective and intuitive approach, she found a muse in negative space. First, by "piercing the block" (carving a hole), in the nineteen-thirties, and then by radically hollowing her sculptures. The cast bronze "Elegy III," from 1966, is one standout in this transporting show (the artist's first in the U.S. in nearly two decades). The elongated, upright capsule contains a tall, shallow cave; three apertures offer shifting views of the object's turquoise patinated interior. Elsewhere, smaller works in wood and stone also impress. For the white marble "Child with Mother," from 1972, Hepworth leaned two pierced forms together in an intimate, perpendicular pose. Nearby, the mahogany "Lyric Form," from 1948-49, evokes a swaying figure, so animate it almost seems to breathe. *Through April 21. (Pace, 537 W. 24th St. 212-421-3292.)*

### Laure Prouvost

Walking into the gallery and onto a stained off-white carpet, you might think there has been some mistake: it looks like a dishevelled travel agency, the staff of which must be on a break. In her New York gallery debut, Prouvost, who is French and splits her time between London and Antwerp, invites viewers to snoop around her installation, titled "Deep Travel, Ink." There are cluttered desks, fake artifacts from exotic (if unnamed) lands, vague promotional films, and absurdist signage. The ambience of aimless escapism is heightened by surreal flourishes, including a computer cable plugged into a small rock and a fountain in which water streams from the nipples of multiple breasts. A large tapestry depicts the agency as a nonsensical medieval map. The show's elliptically escapist tone is summed up by a travel poster scrawled with the phrase, "Go to places that do not exist." *Through April 14. (Lisson, 138 Tenth Ave., at 20th St. 212-505-6431.)*

## GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

### Francesca DiMattio

Too much is never enough in DiMattio's latest ceramic sculptures, three colorful marvels that rise up more than nine feet in the air, piling on a hodgepodge of references from Chinese porcelain and ancient Greek statuary to African ritual objects and fairy tales. In the predominantly blue "Venus II," a panda morphs into the Venus of Willendorf beneath an abstracted torso or trunk (shades of Bernini's Diana turning into a tree), which is studded with nails, like an *nkondi* fetish. It's topped with the bust of a grinning young man embellished with a cake-frosting-worthy assortment of pink, yellow, and mint-green blossoms. With two equally ambitious paintings hanging upstairs, DiMattio offers a rollicking revenge fantasy for every woman artist who has ever been dismissed as *de trop*. *Through April 21. (Salon 94 Bowery, 243 Bowery, at Stanton St. 212-979-0001.)*

### Robert Filliou

The Frenchman was an economist, a Buddhist, and a self-described "genius without talent," who died in 1987, at the age of sixty-one. Filliou used to walk around Paris with little sculptures hidden under his cap, which he had labelled "Galerie Légitime." That koan-like silliness crackles through the photographs, drawings, and doc-

umentation of his performances in this bracing show, though not everything translates. (A mock telegram reading "faim = fin de la faim," which relates to the artist's belief that his work lurked "somewhere between the hunger for the end and the end of hunger," is one case in point.) Still, the show has an abundance of charmers, including "Collective Dance Poem by Chance," in which two bicycle wheels generate random poetry when visitors spin them. *Through April 14. (Freeman, 140 Grand St. 212-966-5154.)*

### Sean Sullivan

The freewheeling presentation of these paintings, unframed drawings on found paper, mixed-media sculptures, and more lends Sullivan's show the in-process feel of a studio visit. In collage-like abstractions, designs of char-treuse, coral, and blue alternate with red pin-stripes, absurdist snippets of text, and elaborate black and green curlicues. On a table in the middle of the room, a dozen or so sheets of pastel-colored dough have been impressed with patterns of circles and lines. The high point seems to hint at Sullivan's base, in the Hudson Valley: a pair of gritty yet bucolic still-lives, painted on four-foot-square boards, covered in washes of translucent forest green punctuated by little orange suns. *Through April 15. (Hanley, 327 Broome St. 646-918-6824.)*

# THE THEATRE

## OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

### Carousel

Jack O'Brien directs a revival of the classic Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, starring Joshua Henry, Jessie Mueller, and Renée Fleming. *(Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. In previews. Opens April 12.)*

### Children of a Lesser God

Joshua Jackson and Lauren Ridloff play a teacher and a deaf custodian who meet at a school for the deaf, in Kenny Leon's revival of the 1980 romantic drama by Mark Medoff. *(Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-239-6200. Opens April 11.)*

### Dance Nation

Lee Sunday Evans directs Clare Barron's new play, about a team of pre-teen dancers competing in the Boogie Down Grand Prix in Tampa Bay. *(Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. Previews begin April 13.)*

### The Iceman Cometh

Denzel Washington stars in George C. Wolfe's revival of the Eugene O'Neill drama, set in a Greenwich Village saloon populated by dead-end dreamers. *(Jacobs, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. In previews.)*

### Mlima's Tale

Lynn Nottage's new play, directed by Jo Bonney, traces the journey of an elephant (Sahr Ngaujah) stuck in the international ivory trade. *(Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. In previews. Opens April 15.)*

### My Fair Lady

Lerner and Loewe's classic 1956 musical returns to Broadway, in a Lincoln Center Theatre revival directed by Bartlett Sher and starring Lauren Ambrose, Harry Hadden-Paton, and Diana Rigg. *(Vivian Beaumont, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. In previews.)*

### Saint Joan

Condola Rashad plays Joan of Arc in the George Bernard Shaw drama, revived by Manhattan Theatre Club and directed by Daniel Sullivan. *(Samuel J. Friedman, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200. In previews.)*

### Summer and Smoke

Transport Group's Jack Cummings III directs the Tennessee Williams drama, in which a Southern minister's daughter falls in love with the neighborhood doctor. *(Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. 866-811-4111. Previews begin April 13.)*

### Travesties

The Roundabout imports Patrick Marber's Menier Chocolate Factory revival of the Tom Stoppard comedy, in which an old man recalls his encounters with James Joyce, Lenin, and the artist Tristan Tzara in Zurich in 1917. *(American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300. In previews.)*

### We Live by the Sea

As part of "Brits Off Broadway," Patch of Blue presents this piece about an autistic teenager who makes a new friend in her coastal town. *(59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200. In previews.)*



## NOW PLAYING

**Bobbie Clearly**

At Roundabout Underground's basement theatre, all four walls have been outfitted with thousands of dried ears of corn behind a chain-link fence, conjuring an atmosphere of enclosing desolation. We're in rural Nebraska, where a boy has fatally shot a girl in a cornfield. Alex Lubischer's three-act play reveals itself in layers, like a Russian nesting doll, but clarity and closure remain elusive to the end. The cast is superb, especially Constance Shulman as Officer Darla, whose conflicting impulses, for punishment and for mercy, bare the story's emotional core. The audience, cast in the role of a documentary film crew interviewing residents affected by the tragedy, is addressed directly throughout, sometimes with prolonged eye contact. There's a good deal of comic relief, but bleakness and enigma rule the day, and the over-all effect is haunting. (*Black Box, Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theatre, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300.*)

**Feeding the Dragon**

In this one-woman show, the actress and debut playwright Sharon Washington recounts her childhood growing up in an apartment inside the St. Agnes branch of the New York Public Library, where her father worked as a live-in custodian. Standing in for family members and local characters, she re-creates scenes from early-nineteen-seventies New York City. The charming set includes a vintage card catalogue and four long rows of books, from which Washington periodically picks up titles by writers who have left their mark on her: James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, W. E. B. Du Bois. The Primary Stages production, initially conceived as a children's book, has the feel of a fairy tale, but instead of battling dragons our protagonist faces more nebulous forces. "Mommy was big on manners," she recalls. "Being polite and well-behaved were survival skills for a little Negro girl." (*Cherry Lane, 38 Commerce St. 866-811-4111.*)

**Frozen**

The Disney juggernaut takes its inevitable victory lap on Broadway, directed by Michael Grandage. In the northern land of Arendelle, Princess Anna (the winning Patti Murin, a skilled comedian) is estranged from her older sister, Elsa (the silver-voiced Caissie Levy), whose magic powers to turn things to ice are hidden from Anna after a childhood accident. The rudimentary projections and slow-moving ice sets are an unfortunate downgrade from the animation, and most of the dozen new songs added by the original songwriters, Kristen Anderson-Lopez and

Robert Lopez, are unremarkable. But the show has its attractions: the fantastic diverse cast (including Jelani Alladin, adorable as the strapping ice-monger Kristoff); Elsa's electric costume change at the climax of "Let It Go," still the most persistent earworm of the Disney oeuvre; and the hilarious second-act number "Hygge," about the Scandinavian concept of coziness, complete with a sauna-themed kick line. (*St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 866-870-2717.*)

**Lobby Hero**

Does anyone do awkward earnestness as well as Michael Cera? In Kenneth Lonergan's 2001 play (revived by Second Stage, inaugurating its new Broadway home), he plays Jeff, the night watchman at a Manhattan apartment building. His boss, William (Brian Tyree Henry), is a black man whose brother has been arrested for a horrible crime; Jeff gets sucked into the coverup and must decide whether to lie to two neighborhood cops, a macho sleazebag (Chris Evans) and a mouthy rookie (Bel Powley). In a "Law & Order" episode, Jeff would be the guy with three lines, but Lonergan expands this hapless Rosencrantz's story into a funny, provocative study of how difficult it is to weigh right and wrong. The ending may be too tidy—criminal-justice issues certainly haven't had much resolution since the play was written—but Trip Cullman's fine production, wonderfully acted and staged, doesn't miss a nuance or a laugh. (*Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.*)

**The Lucky Ones**

As a teen-ager in a corner of Maine, at the small school her family ran, the singer-songwriter Abigail Bengson had a walk-on role in a series of domestic tragedies. Twenty years later, at the edge of an East Village stage, she summons those catastrophes back. Written with her husband, Shaun Bengson, with an assist from the playwright Sarah Gancher, this neo-folk musical is part psychodrama, part true-crime tell-all, part nineties nostalgia trip. It's messy. It should be. Real events disrespect genre; real people, played here by a cast that includes Damon Daunno, Adina Verson, and Myra Lucretia Taylor, defy type. But, while "The Lucky Ones," directed with canny emotionalism and awkward blocking by Anne Kauffman, is often wrenching, it is fundamentally undecided about what it wants to say and why. "Remind me," Abigail sings. "Who are the stories for?" (*Connelly, 220 E. 4th St. 866-811-4111.*)

**Pay No Attention to the Girl**

For the first production in its new home—a repurposed industrial space in Sunset Park—the Target

Margin company and its director, David Herskovits, have cobbled together a version of "A Thousand and One Nights," part of a multi-year exploration of the Scheherazade stories. The five young actors move well and have fine singing voices, but they cannot make the fractured, prismatic script come alive. Using the full vastness of the space and working with hundreds of sound, music, lighting, and blocking cues, they are joined in their effort by participating stage and tech hands. It's too much and too little. The raw material has the potential to illuminate dynamics of East and West, men and women, powerful and enslaved, but the stories are too fragmentary to shed much light. (*The Doxsee, 232 52nd St., Brooklyn. 866-811-4111.*)

**Three Tall Women**

First staged in New York in 1994, Edward Albee's Pulitzer Prize-winning play bristles with unresolved and unresolvable guilt and, finally, with hatred undone. A (Glenda Jackson), a widow, sits upright in a straight-backed chair, her mouth a red gash—she's rich enough to afford B (Laurie Metcalf), her caretaker, and C (Alison Pill), a lawyer who has come to look after her affairs. In the second half of the play, it becomes clear that A, B, and C are one woman—A—but at different stages of her life. Jackson, a two-time Oscar winner, is a gift that Mantello doesn't so much squander as fail to unwrap. As in much of his directorial work, Mantello reconfigures the script to emphasize the fire-and-brimstone moments that he thinks Broadway audiences will respond to, favoring the flash of show biz over the complications of the flesh. (Reviewed in our issue of 4/9/18.) (*Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.*)

**Yerma**

After a run at London's Young Vic that was acclaimed, above all, for Billie Piper's fearless and masterly lead performance, the Armory imports Simon Stone's radical reimagining of Federico García Lorca's 1934 play, which transplants the parable of a woman's obsessive effort to conceive a child to a contemporary gentrified London suburb. Every choice feels perfectly calibrated, including the sudden blackouts that terminate each scene, the surround-sound bursts of Stefan Gregory's arresting choral music, and Lizzie Clachan's extraordinary glass-box set, which transforms as inexplicably as a magic trick. The story and its milieu are exceptionally specific, but, by the time the play reaches its inescapable nadir, it seems to describe much more universal nightmares: the terrifying passage of time, the unspeakable explosion of a dream deferred, and the catastrophe of human desire when it becomes ungovernable and unquenchable. (*Park Avenue Armory, Park Ave. at 66th St. 212-933-5812.*)

## ALSO NOTABLE

**Admissions** Mitzi E. Newhouse. • **Amy and the Orphans** Laura Pels. • **Angels in America** Neil Simon. (Reviewed in this issue.) • **Escape to Margaritaville** Marquis. • **Good for Otto** Pershing Square Signature Center. *Through April 15.* • **Harry Clarke** Minetta Lane Theatre. • **Harry Potter and the Cursed Child, Parts One and Two** Lyric. • **King Lear** BAM Harvey Theatre. • **Mean Girls** August Wilson. • **Miss You Like Hell** Public. • **Old Stock: A Refugee Love Story** 59E59. • **Pygmalion** Sheen Center. • **Rocktopia** Broadway Theatre. • **The Seafarer** Irish Repertory. • **Summer** Lunt-Fontanne. • **This Flat Earth** Playwrights Horizons. • **The Winter's Tale** Polonsky Shakespeare Center. *Through April 15.*



Matthew Broderick returns to the stage in "The Seafarer," Conor McPherson's 2006 drama, in which a boozy poker game in Dublin turns darkly metaphysical. Ciarán O'Reilly directs, at the Irish Rep.

# CLASSICAL MUSIC

## OPERA

### Metropolitan Opera

The Met's revival of Elijah Moshinsky's 2001 production of "**Luisa Miller**"—a minor but effective Verdi opera—might very well be the sleeper hit of the season. Plácido Domingo's interest in singing the supporting role of Luisa's father is the *raison d'être* for the performance, and, at the age of seventy-seven, he has a refulgent voice that has acquired a distinguished patina. But the real stars are Sonya Yoncheva, whose sumptuous soprano seems to float free of her body as she molds it to Luisa's circumstances, and Piotr Beczala, who does some of the best tenor singing the Met has heard this season; the conductor Bertrand de Billy keeps the rhythms snappy and the tempos crisp. *April 14 at 12:30.* • During James Levine's tenure as the house's music director, the Met covered a lot of new ground, but those explorations rarely included French opera. Case in point: Massenet's "**Cendrillon**," an often enchanting work with all the gossamer texture and caressing melody one would expect from a Cinderella story, is only now getting its first performances. The imaginative director Laurent Pelly works with a first-rate cast, including Joyce DiDonato, Alice Coote, Kathleen Kim, and Stephanie Blythe; de Billy. *April 12 at 8 and April 17 at 7:30.* • **Also playing:** A revival of Mary Zimmerman's staging of Donizetti's "**Lucia di Lammermoor**" features the superstar tenor Vittorio Grigolo and a relative newcomer, the coloratura soprano Jessica Pratt, in the leading roles; Roberto Abbado. *April 11 at 7:30 and April 14 at 8.* • Phelim McDermott's new production of Mozart and Da Ponte's "**Così Fan Tutte**" sets the opera in a carnival-like milieu that evokes Coney Island in the nineteen-fifties, complete with sword swallowers and bearded ladies. With especially strong performances from Christopher Maltman, a finely sinister Don Alfonso, and Kelli O'Hara, the magnetic Broadway star, who takes the role of Despina; David Robertson. *April 13 at 8 and April 16 at 7:30.* (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

### New York City Opera: "L'Amore dei Tre Re"

"The Love of Three Kings," Italo Montemezzi's *poema tragico*, captivated audiences in the first half of the twentieth century with its lusty story and music that melds Italianate theatrics, Wagnerian orchestration, and Debussyan atmospherics. It's seldom performed today, except for rare outings that allow audiences and critics to reappraise it for themselves. City Opera's new production stars Philip Cokorinos, Raffaele Abete, Giuseppe Varano, Joo Won Kang, and Daria Masiero; Pacien Mazzagatti conducts, and Michael Capasso directs. *April 12-13 at 7:30, April 14 at 2, and April 15 at 4.* (Rose Theatre, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Broadway at 60th St. 212-721-6500.)

### Manhattan School of Music Senior Opera Theatre: "The Snow Maiden"

Rimsky-Korsakov's favorite of his operas weaves together folk songs, Romantic grandeur, and a touch of otherworldliness to tell the story of a winter sprite who longs to join the human world in springtime. Dona D. Vaughn directs the

conservatory's students in a slightly abridged, English-language production; Jorge Parodi conducts. *April 12-14 at 7:30 and April 15 at 2:30.* (120 Claremont Ave. msmnyc.edu.)

## ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

### New York Philharmonic

The Philharmonic's popular "Art of the Score" series, in which showings of films are accompanied by live renditions of their orchestral soundtracks, continues with "Amadeus: Live," a screening of Miloš Forman's riotous film fantasy about the rise and fall of Mozart. The actor Tom Hulse, who portrayed Mozart in the film, will introduce the movie along with the series' adviser, Alec Baldwin, on the first night; Richard Kaufman conducts. *April 11-12, April 14, and April 17 at 7:30 and April 13 at 11 A.M.* (David Geffen Hall. 212-875-5656.)

### Boston Symphony Orchestra

Leonard Bernstein's life and music are profoundly linked with the New York Philharmonic, but the B.S.O. was part of his youth and of his training as a conductor, and his relationship with it was just as elemental. The first of three concerts at Carnegie Hall, led by the ensemble's music director, Andris Nelsons, offers Bernstein's Symphony No. 2, "The Age of Anxiety" (with a starry piano soloist, Jean-Yves Thibaudet), followed by a work of equal daring, the Fourth Symphony by Shostakovich. The second evening is devoted entirely to Act II of Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde," with Jonas Kaufmann and Camilla Nylund in the title roles; on the final night, Yo-Yo Ma joins the orchestra for a program of music by Mozart, Jörg Widmann (a New York premiere), and Strauss ("Don Quixote"). *April 11-13 at 8.* (212-247-7800.)

### Trinity Church Wall Street: "Total Embrace"

Like so many musicians, Julian Wachner and his Trinity forces are joyfully celebrating the centenary of Leonard Bernstein. The church's concerts begin with one of its lunchtime programs, in which the chamber orchestra NOVUS NY and soloists from the Choir of Trinity Wall Street perform Bernstein's appealing "Songfest" as well as songs from the collection "Des Knaben Wunderhorn," by one of the maestro's favorite composers, Mahler; Daniela Candillari conducts. *April 12 at 1.* (St. Paul's Chapel, 209 Broadway. No tickets required.)

### Bach Vespers: The B-Minor Mass

The Bach cantata series at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church concludes its fiftieth year with a performance of this, Bach's supreme achievement as a composer and, he would doubtless add, as a human being. Donald Meineke, the church's cantor and an admired early-music figure in New York, leads the church's fine singers and orchestra. *April 15 at 5.* (Central Park W. at 65th St. brownpapertickets.com.)

### MATA Festival

Founded to promote emerging composers regardless of aesthetic inclination, the festival mounts the twentieth iteration of what has become a reliably edifying showcase for new music from around

the globe. Befitting a milestone anniversary, this year's festival strikes a balance between celebrating past achievements (chiefly through new pieces by now distinguished prior participants) and pushing past its boundaries. Of particular interest is the East Coast debut of Liminar, a highly regarded Mexican ensemble, during the festival's first two evenings. *April 10-14 at 8.* (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. thekitchen.org.)

### Robin Blaze

With its remarkable clarity and soft contours, the English countertenor's voice is well suited to the courtly charms and transparent textures of lute songs with texts by Shakespeare. He is joined by the lutenist Elizabeth Kenny in a program that features works by Purcell, Dowland, and lesser-known English composers of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. *April 11 at 7:30.* (Weill Recital Hall, Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800.)

### Da Capo Chamber Players

Charles Wuorinen, for more than half a century one of America's preeminent modernist composers, is the subject of a thoughtful tribute from this respected quintet. The program includes seminal works from the nineteen-sixties and more recent pieces, as well as music by two younger composers that Wuorinen influenced: a 2012 composition by David Fulmer and a quintet by Jonathan Dawe written for the occasion. *April 12 at 8.* (Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 212-501-3330.)

### Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center: Calidore String Quartet

The impressive young ensemble, fresh from winning a 2018 Lincoln Center Emerging Artist Award, appears on the Society's schedule, lending its talent to an exuberant program of quartets by Mendelssohn (in D Major, Op. 44, No. 1), Shostakovich, and Beethoven (the "Razumovsky" Quartet No. 3 in C Major). *April 13 at 7:30.* (Alice Tully Hall. 212-875-5788.)

### Bargemusic: "Handel in Harlem"

The weekend at the floating chamber-music series begins with this fantastical program, which imagines the German Baroque giant strolling around Sugar Hill, meeting Gershwin, and, of course, taking the A train uptown. It's the brainchild of the acclaimed Swiss composer and saxophonist (and Harlem resident) Daniel Schnyder, who will be joined by the violinist Mark Peskanov and the trombonist David Taylor. *April 13 at 8.* (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. For tickets and complete schedule, visit bargemusic.org.)

### Ecstatic Music Festival: Patrick Zimmerli

This composer and saxophonist pursues a heady idiom that melds the spontaneity and exuberance of jazz with the complexity and rigor of the modernist composers he admires, including Babbitt, Boulez, and Carter. This program opens with "Clockworks," the set of knotty pieces on Zimmerli's time-engrossed new CD of the same title, played by a supple quartet that features the pianist Ethan Iverson, the bassist Chris Tordini, and the percussionist John Hollenbeck. *April 14 at 8:30.* (Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 212-501-3330.)

### Richard Goode

The eminence grise of New York pianists comes to Alice Tully Hall to perform some time-honored repertory, including works by Byrd, Bach (the English Suite No. 6 in D Minor), Beethoven, and Debussy (the Preludes, Book II). *April 17 at 7:30.* (212-721-6500.)



# NIGHT LIFE



Colter Wall, a rising voice in country circles, brings his gravelly ballads to the Bowery Ballroom.

## Canadian Cowboy

*The singer Colter Wall adds to the legacy of outlaw country.*

On a recent night in the woods west of Nashville, the twenty-two-year-old Canadian singer Colter Wall let out a sigh of relief. He'd been putting the finishing touches on a new batch of recordings, and one track just hadn't felt right. "It's an old cowboy song," he told me. "The only one I wasn't happy about. It's just me singin', playing a chord, and lettin' it ring. It needed an atmospheric feel." Wall wanted to nod toward the traditional

country-and-Western music he'd grown up with: the folksy romanticism of Ramblin' Jack Elliott and Marty Robbins. His producer, the Grammy winner Dave Cobb, invited Wall to his house, where he lit a fire and set up a mike; the singer finished the take accompanied by the sound of the flames. "It's always nice to hear a crackling fire," Wall said.

Wall is among the most reflective young country singers of his generation—though he calls himself a folk-singer, and refers to his new music as Western songs. He's also a gentleman, and will call you sir so often you might

feel rude by comparison. Both his manners and his music are vestiges of an upbringing in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, an agricultural community near the Montana-Canada border. "It's cow country," Wall said. "A lot of ranchers, a lot of farmers, the plains." He chuckled. "There's an old joke that in Swift Current you can watch your dog run away all week."

Wall's records are starkly elegant: twanging guitar, dampened percussion and bass, and the occasional pedal steel. His ace in the hole is his showstopping voice: a resonant, husky baritone, wounded and vulnerable. The singer's self-titled debut album, released last year, was made up of eleven haunting love songs and murder ballads, borrowed from the outlaw-country movement of the nineteen-seventies, when a genre condescendingly referred to as hillbilly music shifted toward something more muted and enduring. On "Kate McCannon," he slowly recounts a marital homicide like a lakeside tale shared at quiet dusk. Townes Van Zandt, whom Wall has covered, was a lodestar of the genre, as was James Szalapski's 1976 music documentary, "Heartworn Highways." The country singer Steve Earle described Wall's songs as "stunning," and added, "He's been listening to the right stuff, and he gets it."

A few days after finishing his upcoming album, Wall left for a tour that's taking him well into the summer. He'll be peppering a few new songs into the set, although he hasn't landed on a name for the tour yet. "I'll probably use the first song as the title," he told me: "Plain to See Plainsman." He also hasn't chosen a backing band, so it's anyone's guess who might be onstage with him at the Bowery Ballroom on April 11, when he'll bring his outlaw country to a decidedly more urban audience. "For the past few months I've been playing solo, but I'm hoping by the time New York rolls around I might have a band with me."

—Benjamin Shapiro

ILLUSTRATION BY JAMIE COE

## ROCK AND POP

*Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.*

**The Feelies**

In the nineteen-eighties, these New Jersey players managed to inspire a generation of guitar-driven indie rockers without ever experiencing the success of cultish acts like R.E.M. The Feelies' angular guitar sound proved to be their lasting achievement, a major signpost on the winding path from post-punk to indie rock, which ultimately led to the mainstream surge of early-nineties alternative. This week, the band settles in for a three-night stand at this historic bi-level record store and venue in Williamsburg. (*Rough Trade NYC, 64 N. 9th St., Brooklyn. roughtradenyc.com. April 12-14.*)

**Glass Gang**

Late last year, this Brooklyn trio quietly released "No Hits," an expansive long-player that layered smeary shoegaze guitars and crystalline synths over trim 808 beats. Much of the material was inspired by a night spent singing karaoke in Chinatown, during which the band members collectively realized that none of their friends had chosen to perform anything written in the past ten years. The next day, they threw away most of their music and started writing songs meant to be sung along with. They'll play through their growing catalogue at this cozy East Village lounge. (*Berlin, 25 Avenue A. 347-586-7247. April 14.*)

**Khruangbin**

The bassist Laura Lee, the guitarist Mark Speer, and the drummer Donald Johnson lay tonal Eastern melodies over American funk rhythms in this Texas-based outfit. The trio was inspired by cassette-tape recordings of nineteen-sixties era Thai funk bands, who combined elements of surf rock and traditional folk songs for a sound referred to on archival blogs as shadow music ("Khruangbin" means "engine fly," i.e., "airplane," in Thai, though the band has no actual roots in Thailand). Khruangbin soon started writing and recording their own fuzzy guitar licks and conga-drum fills in homage to the tapes they loved, with crawling surf-pop grooves that evoke dreamscape neo-noir film scores. Their first album, "The Universe Smiles Upon You," is a deliciously chill instrumental affair, recorded in a remote countryside barn and sounding appropriately unhurried. (*Music Hall of Williamsburg, 66 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. 718-486-5400. April 13-14.*)

**King Woman**

In metal, religious allusions are everywhere. But this West Coast doom outfit's powerful vocalist Kristina Esfandiari elevates her group's sound to the kind of fervent transcendence rarely found outside of a tent revival. Raised in a repressive Charismatic Christian cult, Esfandiari, who is part Iranian, drew on the trauma of her youth for King Woman's outstanding debut, "Created in the Image of Suffering," from 2017. When she performs these cathartic songs in front of her congregation, the collective exorcism leaves devotees shouting and writhing along. King Woman performs before the Midwestern post-rock veterans **Russian Circles**. (*Elsewhere, 599 Johnson Ave., Brooklyn. elsewherebrooklyn.com. April 17.*)

**Pretty Lou's Benefit Concert**

Pretty Lou, a tristate staple club host and d.j. with ties to rap's elite, got his moniker boxing as a teen-ager in Williamsburg and Red Hook gyms before music took hold. An affiliate of Fat Joe's Terror Squad, he was recently diagnosed with aplastic anemia, a rare condition that developed into leukemia. His illness has spurred a rallying of support from close friends in the hip-hop and night-life spheres across the city. This year's installment of his annual birthday benefit concert stars the New York veteran m.c.s **Jim Jones** and **Fat Joe**, as well as the newcomers **A-Boogie** and **Dave East**, in support of Lou's medical battles. (*Irving Plaza, 17 Irving Pl. 212-777-6800. April 17.*)

**U.S. Girls**

Meg Remy grew up in Chicago but now lives in Toronto. Her solo project started as a noise act in 2008, but over time she has skittered across various genres: sixties girl-group pop, shimmery country-and-Western, and wobbly R. & B. Whatever sound she lands on, her aim remains constant: her U.S. Girls outfit is a group devoted to women's experience, a conduit for female anger and emotion. This winter, she released her sixth album, "In a Poem Unlimited," a collaborative long-player with her husband's band, the Cosmic Range, where we find Remy flirting with glam rock, disco, and dance-oriented pop. (*Baby's All Right, 146 Broadway, Brooklyn. 718-599-5800. April 13.*)

**Waxahatchee**

The best albums are time stamps of an artist's life at a particular moment. Katie Crutchfield, the Philadelphia-via-Alabama artist who records under the name Waxahatchee, is a wry songwriter with D.I.Y. punk roots, who pours her own experiences into her songs in an unsparing, riveting way; she recently admitted that her 2015 album, "Ivy Tripp," was the result of "a lot of beating around the bush" in a toxic relationship. Her last record, "Out in the Storm," continued from where "Ivy Tripp" left off; she described it as "a very honest record about a time in which I was not honest with myself." (*Warsaw, 261 Driggs Ave., Brooklyn. 718-387-0505. April 13. Murmrr Theatre, 17 Eastern Pkwy., Brooklyn. April 14.*)

**Wolf Eyes**

Michigan's hardworking ambassadors of harsh noise hold court at Elsewhere, performing songs from the 2015 album "I Am a Problem: Mind in Pieces" (released on Jack White's label, Third Man) and last March's follow-up record, "Undertow." The band's discography can be intimidating (Third Man pegs its output at more than five hundred lathe cuts, CD-Rs, and cassettes); its latest works have marked a turning point, with the trio's pounding postindustrial sound migrating into droning, pop-aware pastures. Earplugs are still recommended. The group co-headlines with **Martin Rev**, supported by **Humanbeast** and **Insect Ark**. (*599 Johnson Ave., Brooklyn. elsewherebrooklyn.com. April 15.*)

## JAZZ AND STANDARDS

**Roy Ayers**

Following the funk down a twisting path, the vibraphonist and composer Ayers began his

long career as a Milt Jackson-inspired bebopper. Born in Los Angeles in 1940, he soaked up his city's rich musical happenings, forming his own band, Ubiquity, in the early seventies. After decades carving through jazz, funk, and fusion, he somehow found himself a hip-hop patriarch of sorts, when his R. & B. hits, including "Everybody Loves the Sunshine," were regularly collaged into all new songs by a generation of producers. He's stirred it up with everyone from Fela Kuti to Rick James to Erykah Badu; the Godfather of Neo-Soul makes a rare Blue Note appearance this week. (*131 W. 3rd St. 212-475-8592. April 11.*)

**Ron Carter**

Nearing eighty-one years old, the great bassist Carter is an official jazz patriarch, but that doesn't mean that he's been setting his ambitions any lower these days. Here, he leads his big band, an occasional labor of love well-stocked with formidable players and crafty charts, in a program that will touch on the music of Michel Legrand, the acclaimed French film composer with whom Carter has had a long association. (*Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St. 212-475-8592. April 12-15.*)

**Eliane Elias**

Apart from "The Impossible Dream," the rest of the score of "Man of La Mancha" can probably be hummed only by hardcore Broadway mavens. Nonetheless, this Grammy-winning, Brazilian-born pianist will put her stamp on the music from this not quite beloved mid-nineteen-sixties hit loosely based on the story of Don Quixote. (*Birdland, 315 W. 44th St. 212-581-3080. April 10-14.*)

**Christian McBride's New Jawn**

"Jawn," it seems, is a Philadelphiaian catchall similar to "joint," and in this sparky quartet the Philadelphia-born super bassist McBride shares the spotlight with three gifted players: the saxophonist Marcus Strickland, the trumpeter Josh Evans, and the drummer Nashiet Waits. No longer an enfant terrible, the forty-five-year-old McBride has settled comfortably into his role as his generation's foremost practitioner of his instrument. (*Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola, Broadway at 60th St. 212-258-9595. April 10-15.*)

**SFJazz Collective: "The Music of Miles Davis"**

There's so much star power in this ambitious octet—including the saxophonists **Miguel Zenon** and **David Sanchez**, the trumpeter **Sean Jones**, and the pianist **Edward Simon**—that it could supply tingle to practically any given repertoire. The epochal work of Miles Davis, though, provides more than enough for any band to sink its teeth into. Davis, iconic as he is, will not be handled with kid gloves by this adventurous ensemble. (*Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232. April 12-15.*)

**Smoke's 19th Anniversary Celebration**

Just short of its emerald anniversary, this up-town jazz haunt welcomes a swath of familiar faces to the stage, including the pianist **Harold Mabern**, the tenor saxophonist **Eric Alexander**, and the drummer **Louis Hayes**, for a birthday blowout. (*Smoke, 2751 Broadway, between 105th and 106th Sts. 212-864-6662. April 13-15.*)



# DANCE

## Tom Gold Dance

Once a New York City Ballet soloist known for his onstage charm, Gold has managed to sustain an active choreographic career since retiring, in 2008. His own dances are also charming, usually musical, and perfectly pleasing to the eye, if seldom particularly original. For the ten-year anniversary of his enterprise, he has gathered a group of dancers to perform a recent work entitled—what else?—"Charm," along with "Shanti," an older ballet, and "Rapid Oxidation," a new opus set to a percussion score by the American composer Donald Knaack. (*Kaye Playhouse, Park Ave. at 68th St. 212-722-4448. April 10-11.*)

## Ballet Hispanico

Two premières this season take inspiration from the life and work of the Spanish playwright and poet Federico García Lorca. In "Espíritus Gemelos" ("Twin Spirits"), Gustavo Ramírez Sansano—a Spanish choreographer whose work this New York-based troupe often performs—looks at the sexually charged friendship between García Lorca and Salvador Dalí. In "Waiting for Pepe," Carlos Pons Guerra—a Spanish choreographer less familiar to hometown audiences—draws on the play "The House of Bernarda Alba," treating its theme of emotional repression in the melodramatic but also tongue-in-cheek manner of a telenovela. (*Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. April 10-15.*)

## Martha Graham Dance Company

Gone are the days when Martha Graham's dancers performed only works by Graham. At City Center, the company presents three distinct programs, each of which contains just one or two examples of vintage Graham. "Embattled Garden" (in the gala program and program B) was her take on temptation in the Garden of Eden, which the designer Isamu Noguchi depicted as a treacherous landscape of prickly rods. Program A features Martha's big, bombastic "Rite of Spring," from 1984—it's late, not so great Graham. Among the new works, the most intriguing is a world première by the cool minimalist Lucinda Childs, "Histoire," set to music for harpsichord by Krzysztof Knittel, mixed in with some Astor Piazzolla. The company will also perform Lar Lubovitch's fluidly musical "The Legend of Ten," originally made for his own company. (*131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. April 11-14.*)

## Jonathan González

For his short contribution to Danspace Project's recent "Dancing Platform Praying Grounds," this budding choreographer handled his theme—the racial history of St. Mark's Church—with a beguiling mix of flippant and serious spookiness. Now, he returns with his full-length piece "ZERO," in which he casts himself and his colleagues as thieves in the church. (*St. Mark's Church In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 866-811-4111. April 12-14.*)

## Inbal Oshman Dance Group

Every "Stabat Mater" concerns the maternal suffering of Mary at the Crucifixion. But "M Stabat Mater," by the Israeli choreographer

Inbal Oshman, presented as part of "Peak Performances," brings in other aspects of motherhood, too, including the rage of the Hindu goddess Kali. As members of New York Baroque Incorporated play Pergolesi's unsurpassed 1736 treatment of the theme, four women move with weighty, sweaty frankness, occasionally smearing themselves with blood-red paint. The work is ritualistic but also makes room for some irreverence: one dancer, held by the others in Pietà poses, keeps escaping with a smile. (*Alexander Kasser Theatre, 1 Normal Ave., Montclair, N.J. 973-655-5112. April 12-15.*)

## Lil Buck and Jon Boogz / "Love Heals All Wounds"

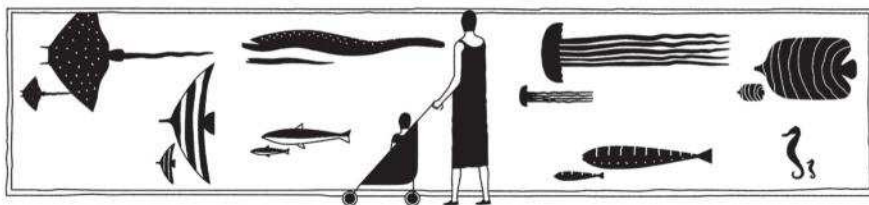
Boogz is an articulate popper, able to make his body look like stop-motion animation. And his

more famous colleague, the Memphis jookin' master Lil Buck, is one of the great dancers of our time. The message of their new show, broadcast right in the title, is admirable if simple; the spoken word, by Robin Sanders (decrying police brutality and the recent resurgence in racism), and the dancing (with fingers curved into heart shapes), by Buck, Boogz, and four others, are not any more illuminating. (*N.Y.U. Skirball, 566 LaGuardia Pl. 212-998-4941. April 14.*)

## Carolyn Dorfman Dance

Celebrating the thirty-fifth anniversary of her company, Dorfman collaborates with a former company member who's made good: Renée Jaworski, a co-artistic director of Pilobolus. Their première, "Snap, Crackle, Pop," which has some fun with commercial advertisements, shares a program with Dorfman's rope-based "Lifeline" and her hula-hoop-centered "Cercle d'Amour." (*New Jersey Performing Arts Center, 1 Center St., Newark, N.J. 888-466-5722. April 14-15.*)

# ABOVE & BEYOND



## The Orchid Show

This edition of the New York Botanical Garden's annual Orchid Show, now in its sixteenth year, features the work of the Belgian garden architect Daniel Ost, a widely celebrated floral artist who studied ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arrangement. Ost has designed towering plant sculptures and gathered the widest array of orchid species ever assembled for the exhibit. The garden hosts tours, Q. & A. sessions, weekly live-music performances, and classes; the program closes with an extensive Earth Day celebration. (*2900 Southern Blvd., the Bronx. 718-817-8700. Through April 22.*)

as freshly cut grass. (*580 Madison Ave. 212-644-9001.*) • American manuscripts and historical documents are the focus of Swann's April 12 sale, which contains both the first Aristotle printed in the New World, from 1554, and a large trove of photographs of the Kennedys from the estate of Cecil W. Stoughton, the official photographer during J.F.K.'s Presidency. (*104 E. 25th St. 212-254-4710.*) • Doyle holds one of its "Doyle at Home" auctions (April 11), a haven for decorators seeking out economically priced wall art, period bookcases, or a pair of prettily upholstered chairs to complete a well-appointed parlor. (*175 E. 87th St. 212-427-2730.*)

## AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

This week, the auction houses return to their bread and butter: jewels and furniture. Christie's trots out a collection of ornate furnishings on April 11—matching ormolu clocks and monumental George III gilt-wood mirrors, along with an elegant marquetry bureau, perfect for an evening of letter-writing by candlelight. This event is followed on April 17 by a sale of glittering gems, led by a large pink diamond ring suitable for the grande dame in your life. (*20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.*) • Bonhams, too, is offering jewels on April 17, including a pair of tasteful teardrop-shaped pearl earrings by Harry Winston and several rings fitted with impressively large emeralds, green

## READINGS AND TALKS

### PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature

This literary festival was founded by Salman Rushdie, Esther Allen, and Michael Roberts, in the wake of the September 11th attacks, with a mission to foster dialogue and exchange among writers around the globe. Years later, the organizers face a newly connected and mobilized world with a program titled "Resist & Reimagine." The schedule includes talks by Sean Penn, R. J. Palacio, and Roxane Gay, as well as a lecture by Hillary Clinton, who will appear in conversation with the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. (*Various locations. worldvoices.pen.org. April 16-22.*)

# FOOD & DRINK



## TABLES FOR TWO

### Té Company

163 W. 10th St.

From the sidewalk, you might not notice Té Company, a two-year-old Taiwanese tearoom in the West Village. The narrow storefront is marked by little more than a small teapot painted on the window. Inside are just a few wooden tables and a counter behind which neatly aproned employees move in quiet concert. There's nothing to suggest that you've come to one of the most exciting restaurants in New York.

It's the service that starts to give away the secret. Ask for a recommendation and your server will flip gently through the leather-bound menu, guiding you to the Oriental Beauty ("super grassy, a little citrusy"), perhaps, or the No. 208 ("sweeter and rounder, shares a grandfather with milk oolong"). The tea is steeped in ceramic pots, then decanted at just the right moment into little pitchers, to be poured into handleless cups. The staff's sense of timing is uncanny: when the room is busy, your server may ask you politely to hold, please, as he pivots gracefully to decant another customer's tea.

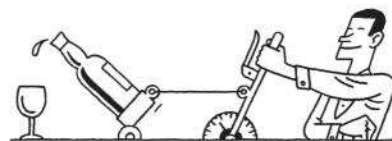
There are not many places in New York to get tea this carefully prepared, a fact that should mean the food takes second billing. And yet there are few places in New York to eat as well as you can here. The tea is the domain of Elena Liao, who

worked in fashion before she began importing the tea of her native Taiwan and wholesaling it to restaurants, including Per Se, where her husband and partner, Frederico Ribeiro, was once a sous-chef. At Té Company, he prepares a very small selection of dishes that are modestly referred to as "snacks." The menu used to tend toward the cuisines of Spain and Ribeiro's native Portugal; recently, he decided to take things in a Taiwanese direction, to better pair with the tea.

Now you can order a bowl of glossy rice topped with luscious cubes of braised pork, or a plate of poached octopus with edges that melt in your mouth, dressed in a fruity wild-tea vinaigrette. Little half-pipes of crunchy endive are pooled with olive oil, lime zest, and salty shaved bottarga, as crisp as ocean air, and drizzled in impossibly light garlic aioli. "Your salads make me feel a way that salads don't usually make me feel," a regular said to Ribeiro one recent afternoon. Two women finishing up their lunch decided, in lieu of dessert, to order a bowl of the pork. They missed out on the pineapple linzer cookie, featuring pineapple-rosemary jam (made with *yuzu kosho*, a spicy fermented Japanese condiment) between disks of flaky hazelnut shortbread. It's Ribeiro's homage to classic Taiwanese pineapple cake, and it makes me feel a way that cookies don't usually make me feel. (Dishes \$5-\$14.)

—Hannah Goldfield

## BAR TAB



### The Honeywell

3604 Broadway, at 149th St. (646-861-0489)

After a crate of records was blown up at Comiskey Park, in 1979, people claimed that disco had died. The Honeywell, a Harlem cocktail bar, begs to differ. In this seventies-appointed spot—think lazy Susans in back booths and a black-and-white TV playing reruns of "Family Feud"—the ebullient music is very much alive. In the bathroom, hits by the likes of the O'Jays and Donna Summer run on a loop: "Every time I go in there, I start dancing, it's so happy!" a tattoo-besleeved patron exclaimed to his date the other day. The bar owes its name to a drunken night in Chicago, when the owners took a picture of themselves in front of a large sign for the Honeywell conglomerate; one of the servers noted, "So when they were opening a bar they thought, Oh, that's a cool name, let's just name it after an electronics company!" Don't let the kitsch put you off the extraordinary drinks here, though. Among them, the Monk Fashion is the hands-down champion. First, Scotch is combined with Chartreuse; then the mixture is sprayed with a peaty tincture and placed under a bell jar, which a bartender proceeds to pump full of wood smoke. It evokes the feeling of sprawling in front of an open fire, joyful with charred goodness. A runner-up is the Tiger Beet (vodka, beet juice, mint, and lemon), whose wholesome earth tones mask the potency of the liquor. Matchbooks, each adorned with a picture of one of the owners' mothers, line the counter. Grab one, join hands with a friendly patron, and you'll be just about ready to start a Love Train.—Nicolas Niarchos



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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT ABOUT FACEBOOK

Last week, on a conference call with reporters, Mark Zuckerberg, the C.E.O. of Facebook, began, uncharacteristically, with an apology. “For the first decade, we really focussed on all the good that connecting people brings,” he said. “But it’s clear now that we didn’t do enough. We didn’t focus enough on preventing abuse.” He added, “That goes for fake news, foreign interference in elections, hate speech, in addition to developers and data privacy. We didn’t take a broad enough view of what our responsibility is, and that was a huge mistake.” Taken alone, any of the incidents he alluded to—the exploitation of Facebook data by the political consultancy Cambridge Analytica, Russian meddling in the 2016 election, the uptick in viral hoaxes and propaganda—might, eventually, have been forgiven. Taken together, though, they’ve caused a profound shift in public perception, leading people to wonder why they ever thought of social media as a force for good. This week, for the first time, Zuckerberg will testify before Congress about Facebook’s mistakes. The extent to which the public finds him credible, or at least sympathetic, will affect the company’s stock price, the velocity of the #DeleteFacebook movement, and, possibly, the company’s long-term survival.

Facebook is now the biggest social-media company—and advertising platform and data tracker—in the world, with more than two billion users. In 2004, when Zuckerberg built the company, and

for years afterward, he was hailed as a be hoodied innovator. His motto, “Move fast and break things,” was regarded as youthful insouciance. Anyone who expressed concern about the role of social media in our society, and particularly in our politics, was treated as a cut-rate Andy Rooney, too curmudgeonly to learn to stop worrying and love the selfies.

It’s now clear that the problem wasn’t the selfies; it was the business model. For years, tech critics warned, “You’re not the customer, you’re the product.” “We could make a ton of money if we monetized our customers,” Tim Cook, the C.E.O. of Apple, recently told the journalists Kara Swisher and Chris Hayes. His point was that Apple’s model—charging for goods and services—is healthier than that of Google and Facebook. Those companies give consumers free things, such as birthday reminders and quick

bursts of quantifiable attention, in exchange for their private data, which digital marketers then use to sell them products, ideologies, or candidates.

For a long time, this trade-off, if people thought about it at all, apparently seemed worth it. Any potential harm seemed distant and abstract. Then came the Trump campaign, Brexit, a resurgence of far-right extremism across Europe and the United States, and the widespread inability to distinguish information from disinformation. Social media didn’t cause these developments, but it certainly facilitated them.

Cambridge Analytica’s executives claim to have converted Facebook data into “psychographic” profiles, which political propagandists then used to microtarget users, sending them ads tailored to their biases and anxieties. (Initially, the firm was said to have harvested fifty million profiles; last week, Facebook revised that number to eighty-seven million.) The executives may have inflated their power—depending on your biases and anxieties, they seem either like crafty Bond villains or like bumbling paper-pushers in an Armando Iannucci satire. Still, whether or not they could sway people’s moods, their beliefs, and, ultimately, their votes, Facebook surely can.

Since its inception, Facebook has delivered two contradictory sales pitches. To the public, it insisted that it is not an editor or a gatekeeper but merely an open platform, neutrally reflecting the world. But no platform is neutral; its algorithms must, by definition, prioritize some things over others. Facebook





was designed to maximize attention, so its algorithms prioritize the posts that spur the most comments, clicks, and controversy, creating a feedback loop in which buzzy topics generate yet more buzz. (A *Time* headline from June, 2015: “Donald Trump’s Presidential Announcement Sparks Huge Facebook Reaction.”) Meanwhile, Facebook’s pitch to advertisers sounded not unlike Cambridge Analytica’s: With our sophisticated tools, any advertiser can deliver any message to any microsegment of the market. Now that the market in question is the democratic marketplace of ideas, Facebook is again professing neutrality. But this time the public doesn’t seem to be buying it.

Two days after Trump was elected, Zuckerberg was asked whether Facebook had “distorted the way that people perceived the information during the course of the campaign.” He replied, “Voters make decisions based on their lived experience.” But online ex-

perience and lived experience become more inseparable every day. If what people see online is supposed to have no impact on what they do in the world, what is the point of social media? A decade ago, the upstart entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley promised to topple the gatekeepers in journalism, business, and politics. They have succeeded. Now, although they go to great lengths to deny it, the former upstarts have become gatekeepers themselves.

For almost a week after the Cambridge Analytica scandal broke, Zuckerberg remained silent, while his company lost nearly fifty billion dollars in stock value. Then he embarked on an apology tour, which included last week’s conference call. Alex Kantrowitz, of BuzzFeed, asked whether Facebook would consider making less profit in order to protect users’ privacy. Zuckerberg proceeded to answer a question that he hadn’t been asked, about ad relevance. If Kantrowitz had a follow-

up, no one heard it—reporters’ phones were muted after their initial question. When Zuckerberg testifies before Congress, he won’t have the luxury of muting his interrogators.

If Zuckerberg wants to regain the public’s trust, he can start by dropping the pretense of neutrality. Facebook guides what billions of people see, hear, and know about the world. If this doesn’t make it a media company, then the distinction is semantic enough to be meaningless. In addition to apologizing and making reassuring noises about the sanctity of user privacy, Zuckerberg should make some clear commitments: to protect Facebook’s users from microtargeted propaganda; to use his algorithms to promote truth over reckless sensationalism; to prevent bad actors from using his tools to sow discord and bigotry. After more than a decade of moving fast and breaking things, it’s time to slow down and clean up the mess.

—Andrew Marantz

## DEPT. OF RESOLUTION NORFOLK VS. HARVARD



The four nor’easters in March brought down trees and closed schools and nearly derailed a much anticipated, historic contest between the Norfolk Prison Colony Debating Society and the Harvard College Debating Union. But, after a storm cancellation, the debate at last took place at the end of the month, at MCI-Norfolk, a medium-security prison an hour outside Boston.

The prison, which was designed in the nineteen-twenties by a Harvard alumnus and modelled on a college campus, started a debate team in 1933. Malcolm X, who entered the prison in 1948, was a member. (“Once my feet got wet,” he said, “I was gone on debating.”) Its first international debate was held in 1951, against Oxford University; Norfolk, charged with arguing against free health care, won. Laurence Tribe debated at Norfolk in 1961, when he was a Harvard junior and the national intercollegiate champion. “The

guys we debated that day were serving either life sentences or the rough equivalent,” Tribe recalled recently. “They gave us a good fight.” When the Norfolk debate team disbanded, in 1966, its record stood at a hundred and forty-four wins and eight losses.

No shirts with words on them are allowed at MCI-Norfolk; no tissues, no jewelry, no anything. Prison officials made one exception on debate day. “They let us bring in paper,” Asher Spector, a Harvard freshman, said. “But not pens.”

The prison team had re-formed in 2016, and since then had battled Boston College (a win) and M.I.T. (a loss, on a technicality). The month of storms had been a problem for the Norfolk debaters. They are allowed only one hour a week to prepare together, and they hadn’t been able to talk through their arguments while walking around the yard, as they usually do, because it was closed. The inmates also aren’t allowed to use the Internet, and had to rely on research materials brought to them by friends and family members.

The debate was held in an auditorium, with a raised wooden stage and a faded velvet curtain. The two teams of five faced each other, seated at metal

tables covered with paper tablecloths. Just before the debate was to start, a guard shouted, “Code!” “Someone must have fainted, or there was a fight or something,” an inmate named Sharp explained, shrugging. “Everyone has to stay put until it’s over.” Meanwhile, James Keown, the captain of the Norfolk team, asked Sophia Caldera, Harvard’s captain, what she thought about different forms of debate. Keown, broad-shouldered and red-headed, said he was looking for a kind of debate that would involve more people—he wanted to get more inmates onto the team. “How about British Parliamentary?” Caldera suggested. “That’d be eight per round.”

Each debate topic has to be approved by the Massachusetts Department of Correction. The Norfolk team explained to the Harvard students that the idea was to avoid topics that could make the inmates resent the government. This day’s topic was “The United States should abolish the Electoral College.” Norfolk had volunteered to argue against the resolution, granting to their guests the easier argument, and the one that would win over the prison audience.

There was no gavel to launch the proceedings (too dangerous), but eventually

the debate began. “Norfolk will take the ‘con’ side,” a moderator announced. “No pun intended.”

Harvard went first, arguing that the Electoral College disenfranchised the poor and decreased voter turnout. “O.K., O.K.!” inmates in the audience interjected approvingly, or, more enthusiastically, “Ya-ya, ya-ya!”

Steven Quinlan opened for Norfolk, seizing the attention of the room. He had a five-contention argument, much of which he recited from memory, including long passages from Cato Institute publications, Federal Election Commission rulings, and the Federalist Papers. Norfolk emphasized the importance of the Electoral College for the stability of the Republic. (This is a hard sell.)

Spector, in Harvard’s first “pro” rebuttal, pointed out the origins of the Electoral College in the Constitution’s pro-slavery three-fifths clause, and noted a modern analogue: just as slaves were not allowed to vote, so people convicted of felonies are not allowed to vote; nevertheless, they are included in the census count that determines each state’s number of Electoral College delegates. The crowd cheered and urged him on. Collegiate debaters are not used to having an audience, and Spector, overwhelmed, briefly lost his thread.

The two teams jabbed and dodged, closely matched. The contest seemed to turn on two moments. First, Ronald (Lefty) Leftwich, for Norfolk, came to the lectern, without notes, and, in an otherwise flawless recitation, stumbled, and forgot a line. He paused. “Take your time, man,” a member of the audience called out. The room fell silent, except for the crackling of the guards’ radios. Leftwich stepped away from the lectern, grabbed a page of notes, and resumed.

Caldera, of Harvard, picked up on Spector’s argument about felons, and added undocumented immigrants. Much of the audience rose to its feet.

When the debate was over, a panel of judges ruled Harvard the winner, sixty-eight points to sixty-one. Leftwich felt terrible about losing his place. “That never happens,” he said. “We need to do a rematch. Will they do a rematch?”

—Jill Lepore

## THE BOARDS CUTTING THE RUBBISH



Dame Diana Rigg scurried around the Frick Collection, trying to find a Rembrandt. “There’s a self-portrait that sort of taught me about acting,” she said, pushing through a tour group. She poked her head into a room of Fragonards—“Too rococo-co-co!”—before a museum attendant told her to turn left at the Velázquez. She circled through galleries, marvelling at the carpet (“Heaven, isn’t it?”), and wound up back where she started. “Well, this is a bit of a disappointment,” she said.

Aha! There it was, in the West Gallery: the Dutch master in a velvet beret, fingering a staff, his Depardieu nose gleaming. “See, he wasn’t doing anything on commission,” Rigg whispered. “He didn’t have to portray the furbelows and the lace of his customers. He was just painting for himself. And it’s much like acting. When you get to a certain age, you cut out all the rubbish, yes? And get to the single strokes that mean something.” She mimed brushstrokes: “K-shoo! K-shoo! K-shoo! That’s what it taught me.”

Rigg first saw the painting in 1964, while touring with the Royal Shakespeare Company, as Cordelia, in “King Lear.” This was shortly before she appalled her Shakespearean colleagues by joining the TV spy series “The Avengers,” which transformed her into a mod sex symbol. As Emma Peel—a play on “man appeal”—she wore go-go boots and catsuits (“the leather ones were killer”) while kittenishly pointing a pistol. She eventually returned to the stage, and visited the Frick whenever she passed through New York. She last appeared on Broadway in 1994, when she won a Tony for playing Medea. “I’d torn a cord—it was very tough vocally—and I wasn’t allowed to speak during the day. So the Frick was the perfect place.”

She sat by a fountain, using her fur-trimmed cardigan as a cushion. At seventy-nine, Rigg is returning to Broadway in “My Fair Lady,” which opens next week at the Vivian Beaumont. She plays the mother of the phonetics professor Henry Higgins. In 1974, she had her turn

as Eliza Doolittle, the Cockney flower girl whom he trains to be a lady, in a West End production of “Pygmalion,” the George Bernard Shaw play on which the musical is based. “I played it for my time,” she said. “Now, with #MeToo and all that, it’s a different time altogether.”

Back in her “Avengers” days, she pronounced feminism “boring.” But she was ahead of the curve when it came to the wage gap, after discovering that, with a salary of ninety pounds a week, she was paid less than the cameraman. “I kicked up a fuss about it, and was termed mercenary as a result,” Rigg recalled. “I have never actually joined any female movement. I think, if I’d been a suffragette, I would have been very much a part of that.”



Diana Rigg

But so much of it is economic. If women were paid equal to men, they would get equal respect. A rich woman is listened to. A poor woman is not.” (Eliza Doolittle, Act II, Scene 5: “The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she is treated.”)

The day before, an Edwardian expert had spoken to the cast, but Rigg had done her own research. “Higgins calls Eliza ‘guttersnipe’—‘guttersnipe’ is an American word. On Wall Street, the gutters were running with water and paper and bits of cloth, and there would be poor people picking them up. Google told me that.” Unlike Eliza, Rigg never needed training in elocution, even at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. “My father had a broad Yorkshire ‘A,’” she said, and honked the word “grass.” But she was whisked from the North at two months old, and spent her first seven years in



India, where her father was a railway engineer. “He was employed by the maharajas, not the British,” she went on. “He built the railways for the Maharaja of Bikaner.”

Lately, Rigg has drawn a new generation of fans, as the conniving Lady Olenna Tyrell, on “Game of Thrones.” “People dress up as her,” she said proudly. “Men, mostly.” Lady Olenna’s signature wimple was Rigg’s idea, since she refused to spend more than fifteen minutes in hair and makeup. “No futzing around. I cannot stand it. So I ended up with this coverall stuff, which is perfect—except on a windy day on location in Croatia, where everything’s blowing about. Then they pin everything down, so you can’t move. I had a meltdown one day. It was hot and I was pinned in. A lot of ‘F’s.” On her way out of the Frick, she paused at a marble staircase. “Now, that is ravishing. I’d quite like to make an entrance down that, you know?”

—Michael Schulman

## BRAVE NEW WORLD CHEFLESS



Last month, four recent M.I.T. graduates, engineers with a shared passion for robotics, gathered in a lab at a startup incubator near Boston, to show off their pet project. They stood around

a hulking console that looked like an old mainframe computer but was actually a self-cleaning robotic kitchen, designed to prepare an entire meal in less than three minutes. They call their contraption the Spyce Kitchen, which spawned a nickname, the Spyce Boys, and, as they introduced themselves, they might have been members of a boy band taking the stage.

“I’m the lead electrical engineer, making sure the motors and sensors are working,” Brady Knight, a bookish twenty-three-year-old from the Bay Area, wearing a black-and-white gingham shirt, said.

“I’m the C.O.O.,” Kale Rogers, twenty-four and known to the others as Ginger Spyce, because of his shock of red hair, said. “I do a lot of stuff—designing the branding experience, the whole customer experience, managing the restaurant.”

“I’m the C.E.O.,” Michael Farid, twenty-six, chimed in. He is a native of Egypt, with a buzz cut and the only master’s degree in the group. “I sort of, like, find a direction in how to identify ways to further culinary expectations.”

“Luke, he’s the lead mechanical engineer,” Farid went on, pointing at Luke Schlueter, a soft-spoken twenty-three-year-old champion swimmer from St. Louis. “He builds stuff. We all designed certain parts of it, but he put the entire thing together.”

Schlueter showed how the inner workings of the steel-cased robot kitchen are visible through its glass façade. Seven cameras, named for the Seven Dwarfs, keep watch over its functioning. “You’ve

got Happy, Grumpy, and Sneezzy over there,” he said. “And they’re monitoring full run-through tests.”

After months of food-safety and emissions evaluations, the National Sanitation Foundation had cleared the Spyce Kitchen for commercial use. Later this month, a nearly identical copper-clad unit will begin serving customers (seven different “bowls” will be available, for \$7.50 each) at a fast-casual restaurant called Spyce, which will open near the Freedom Trail, in downtown Boston.

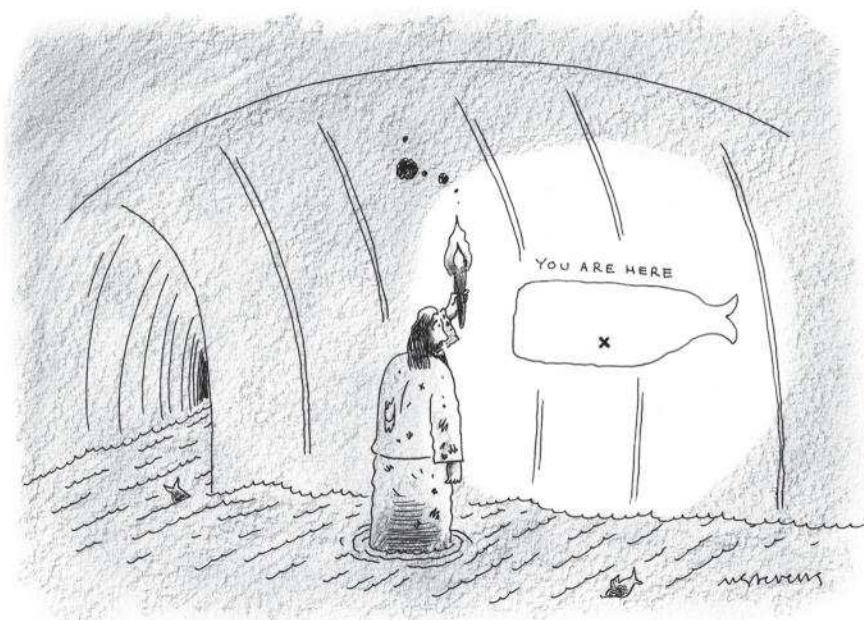
Another member of the team, although not technically a Spyce Boy, is the chef Daniel Boulud, whom Farid reached out to, with an e-mail, in 2016. To the Boys’ surprise, Boulud responded immediately, and offered to take a look at the robot the next time he was in Boston.

Most fledgling cooks would be cowed by the idea of preparing a meal for Boulud. But, when the chef visited, the engineers simply pushed a button, and two and a half minutes later a bowl of chicken-bacon-and-sweet-potato hash was served.

“I go, I meet them, I’m super impressed,” Boulud, who signed on as the team’s culinary director, recalled. “I like them, also—they’re not sort of crazy renegades. They’re clean-cut, they’re intelligent, and they’re passionate about food.”

Boulud has been consulting with the fifth Spyce Boy, Sam Benson, the outfit’s head chef, who is thirty-three, about recipes. The technology has come a long way since the first iteration, which was conceived as an engineering solution to every hungry college student’s gripe—where to get good, cheap food fast. (It’s the same market that the meal-replacement drink Soylent is after.) The Boys built the prototype in the basement of their fraternity, Delta Upsilon, using microcontrollers, inexpensive oven hoods, household power strips, and plastic trash bins, and attaching an air-conditioner to keep ingredients cool.

That old model works much like the new, state-of-the-art version, which has finely calibrated temperature and volume sensors and seven custom-forged “cooking woks.” In the lab, Farid typed an order into a computer tablet, and the machine roared to life. The makings of a Moroccan bowl—pre-measured chickpeas, chopped tomatoes, olives, currants, and freekeh, dispensed from individual hop-





pers—travelled across a mechanized track, Rube Goldberg style, and into a nonstick barrel-shaped pot heated over an induction panel. The pot, like a miniature cement mixer, rocked and rolled, sizzled and seared, mixing and cooking simultaneously, before tilting its steaming contents into a waiting bowl. A hot-water jet immediately scrubbed the pot clean.

The demonstration might have ended there, a fully mechanized marvel. But, while the technological goal is maximum speed and efficiency—“through-put,” in the lingo of fast-casual restaurants—the Spyce Boys, in deference to Boulud, had decided to add a human touch to every robot-cooked bowl that is served.

Benson pulled on a pair of rubber gloves and loomed over a garnishing station stocked with chopped cilantro, toasted almonds, avocado crema, and tamarind-date chutney—the same toppings that diners will be offered at the restaurant.

“A bowl, a jumbled-up mixture, is fine,” Farid said. “But, if you want a customer to get really excited about something, it has to taste great, smell great, and look great. And it has to come with a smile.”

—Jay Cheshes

## LET IT SNOW DEPT. MELTDOWN



A few years ago, professional skiers and snowboarders began adding a hashtag—#ProtectOurWinters—to Instagram shots of themselves tearing down snowy slopes. “A good winter used to be, you have a lot of powder,” Jeremy Jones, the

founder of Protect Our Winters, a nonprofit that aims to engage the winter-sports industry in climate-change discussion, said the other day. “Now a good winter is if you can ski at all.”

Jones, who is forty-three, with shaggy hair and a surfer’s drawl, has a vested interest in winter’s future: he has been snowboarding for a living since he was sixteen, when going pro meant sleeping on the floor of a hotel room rather than in a van. “There were no team managers then, there was no big contract,” he said. “I rented a closet for a while.”

Jones now lives with his family in Truckee, on the California side of Lake Tahoe, and spends long days hiking with a weighted pack, training for uncharted slopes in the backcountry of the Sierra Nevada. (He mostly stopped using helicopters or snowmobiles to get to remote snowboarding sites years ago.) Last month, he took a day off to check in on some local businesses to see how winter was treating them. He pulled his muddy Subaru into the parking lot of Tahoe XC, a cross-country-skiing outfit.

“We opened at the end of January for ten days, then had a two-week break because of no snow,” Ben Grasseschi, the organization’s executive director, said. “Typically, we hope to open around Christmas. We’re trying to diversify. Shoulder seasons now seem to be longer than the actual winter.”

Next stop: Tahoe Dave’s Boardshop. “We started off slow,” Kim Percy, an employee, said. “When it’s fifty degrees, it’s hard to sell jackets.” Helmets were on sale, for thirty per cent off. “We’re actually selling a lot of snowboards,” Percy said. “People are breaking them because snow levels are so low.”

Jones started Protect Our Winters in 2007, alarmed by the receding glaciers he saw while snowboarding in the Alps, and frustrated by the outdoor-sports industry’s silence about climate change. “I never thought I’d get political,” he said over a veggie burger at Moody’s, a jazz bar and restaurant. (“I can’t even remember a standard winter,” one of the owners, J.J. Morgan, told him, adding that business at the Truckee Hotel, which he also co-owns, has been way down.)

Having shilled for corporate sponsors and funded his own snowboarding films, Jones knew how to raise money. “The big thing was: what do we do with

it?” he said. He started by bringing in energy experts to advise his following. “At first it was, like, ‘Change your light bulbs.’” Over time, he came to realize that even if every snowboard manufacturer put solar panels on its roof it still wouldn’t move the needle. “It became clear that change needs to happen on a policy level,” he said.

Protect Our Winters enlists professional athletes to publicize climate change on social media, particularly Instagram, a platform generally devoted to babies and brunches. The organization, which has a staff of eight, sends stars like Jimmy Chin (he skied down Mt. Everest) and Ian McIntosh (he survived a sixteen-hundred-foot fall) to colleges and classrooms all over the country to teach students about global warming. “We find it’s very effective, compared to just having a scientist,” Jones said. The Obama Administration praised Jones for rallying public support behind the Clean Power Plan, which went into effect in 2015. When Obama spoke in Tahoe, the following year, Jones drove straight from a ten-day camping trip to take a photograph with him. “I was in a stream in Yosemite cleaning dirt off my pants,” he said. His interaction with the Trump Administration has been more limited. “Our President is, like, ‘I wish there was *more* global warming—it’s cold right now in New York!’” he said, miming Trump furiously tweeting with his thumbs.

Protect Our Winters is looking for candidates to back in this year’s midterm elections in toss-up congressional districts. Jones pointed out that legislation allowing drilling in the Arctic was recently approved by Congress, but passed in the Senate by only three votes. He said, “If we can bring one new vote—we’re going to try and bring four, but if we can bring one—that’s a major, major deal.”

Jones’s own congressman, Tom McClintock, voted last year to slash E.P.A. funding. Jones twice visited McClintock’s office, but he made no progress. “My insides are being ripped out, but I know that I’m not there to get into an argument,” he said.

What about invoking winter sports? “The congressman doesn’t go outside,” Jones said with a sigh. “We asked him if he recreates or anything, and he said, ‘Uh, I go for a walk a little bit.’”

—Sheila Marikar



# THE SILENCE

*Confronting the legacy of childhood trauma.*

BY JUNOT DÍAZ



X—

Last week I returned to Amherst. It's been years since I was there, the time we met. I was hoping that you'd show up again; I even looked for you, but you didn't appear. I remember you proudly repped N.Y.C. during the few minutes we spoke, so I suspect you'd moved back or maybe you were busy or you didn't know I was in town. I have a distinct memory of you in the signing line, saying nothing to anyone, intense. I assumed you were going to ask me to read a manuscript or help you find an agent, but instead you asked me about the sexual abuse alluded to in my books. You asked, quietly, if it had happened to me.

You caught me completely by surprise.

I wish I had told you the truth then, but I was too scared in those days to say anything. Too scared, too committed to my mask. I responded with some evasive bullshit. And that was it. I signed your books. You thought I was going to say something, and when I didn't you looked disappointed. But more than that you looked abandoned. I could have said anything but instead I turned to the next person in line and smiled. Out of the corner of my eye I watched you pick up your backpack, slowly put away your books, and leave. When the signing was over I couldn't get the fuck away from Amherst, from you and your question, fast enough. I

ran the way I've always run. Like death itself was chasing me. For a couple of days afterward I fretted; I worried that I'd given myself away. But then the old oblivion reflex took over. I pushed it all down. Buried it all. Like always.

But I never really did forget. Not our exchange or your disappointment. How you walked out of the auditorium with your shoulders hunched.

I know this is years too late, but I'm sorry I didn't answer you. I'm sorry I didn't tell you the truth. I'm sorry for you, and I'm sorry for me. We both could have used that truth, I'm thinking. It could have saved me (and maybe you) from so much. But I was afraid. I'm still afraid—my fear like continents and the ocean between—but I'm going to speak anyway, because, as Audre Lorde has taught us, my silence will not protect me.

X—

Yes, it happened to me.

I was raped when I was eight years old. By a grownup that I truly trusted.

After he raped me, he told me I had to return the next day or I would be “in trouble.”

And because I was terrified, and confused, I went back the next day and was raped again.

I never told anyone what happened, but today I'm telling you.

And anyone else who cares to listen.

That violación. Not enough pages in the world to describe what it did to me. The whole planet could be my inkstand and it still wouldn't be enough. That shit cracked the planet of me in half, threw me completely out of orbit, into the lightless regions of space where life is not possible. I can say, truly, *que casi me destruyó*. Not only the rapes but all the sequelae: the agony, the bitterness, the self-recrimination, the asco, the desperate need to keep it hidden and silent. It fucked up my childhood. It fucked up my adolescence. It fucked up my whole life. More than being Dominican, more than being an immigrant, more, even, than being of African descent, my rape defined me. I spent more energy running from it than I did living. I was confused about why I didn't fight, why I had an erection while I was being raped, what I did to deserve it. And always I was afraid—afraid that the rape had “ruined” me; afraid that I would be “found out”;

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY THE AUTHOR

afraid afraid afraid. “Real” Dominican men, after all, aren’t raped. And if I wasn’t a “real” Dominican man I wasn’t anything. The rape excluded me from manhood, from love, from everything.

The kid before—hard to remember. Trauma is a time traveller, an ouroboros that reaches back and devours everything that came before. Only fragments remain. I remember loving codes and Encyclopedia Brown and pastelones and walking long distances in an effort to learn what lay beyond my N.J. neighborhood. At night I had the most vivid dreams, often about “Star Wars” and about my life back in the Dominican Republic, in Azua, my very own Tatooine. Was just getting to know this new English-speaking me, was just becoming his friend—and then he was gone.

No more spaceship dreams, no more Azua, no more me. Only an abiding sense of wrongness and the unbearable recollection of being violently penetrated.

By the time I was eleven, I was suffering from both depression and uncontrollable rage. By thirteen, I stopped being able to look at myself in the mirror—and the few times I accidentally glimpsed my reflection I’d recoil like I’d got hit in the face by a jellyfish stinger. (What did I see? I saw the crime, my grisly debasement, and if anyone looked at me too long I would run or I would fight.)

By fourteen, I was holding one of my father’s pistols to my head. (He’d been gone a few years, but he’d generously left some of his firearms behind.) I had trouble at home. I had trouble at school. I had mood swings like you wouldn’t believe. Since I’d never told anyone what had happened my family assumed that was just who I was—unmaldito loco. And while other kids were exploring crushes and first love I was dealing with intrusive memories of my rape that were so excruciating I had to slam my head against a wall.

Of course, I never got any kind of help, any kind of therapy. Like I said, I never told anyone. In a family as big as mine—five kids—it was easy to get lost, even when you were going under. I remember my mother telling me, after one of my depressions, that I should pray. I didn’t even bother to laugh.

When I wasn’t completely out of it I read everything I could lay my hands

on, played Dungeons & Dragons for days on end. I tried to forget, but you never forget. Night was the worst—that’s when the dreams would come. Nightmares where I got raped by my siblings, by my father, by my teachers, by strangers, by kids who I wanted to be friends with. Often the dreams were so upsetting that I would bite my tongue, and the next morning I’d spit out blood into the bathroom sink.

And in no time at all I was failing everything. Quizzes, quarters, and then entire classes. First I got booted out of my high school’s gifted-and-talented program, then out of the honors track. I sat in class and either dozed or read Stephen King books. Eventually I stopped showing up altogether. School friends drifted away; home friends couldn’t wrap their heads around it.

Senior year, while everyone was getting their college acceptances, I went another way: I tried to kill myself. What happened was that in the middle of a deep depression I suddenly became infatuated with this cute-ass girl I knew at school. For a few weeks my gloom lifted, and I became utterly convinced that if this girl went out with me, if she fucked me, I’d be cured of all that ailed me. No more bad memories. I’d been watching “Excalibur” on heavy rotation, so I was all about miraculous regeneration. When I finally got up the nerve to ask her out and she said nope, it felt as though the world had finally closed the door on me.

The next day I swallowed all these leftover drugs from my brother’s cancer treatment, three bottles’ worth.

Didn’t work.

You know why I didn’t try again the next day?

Because my one and only college acceptance arrived in the mail. I had assumed I wasn’t going anywhere, had completely forgotten that I had any schools left to hear from. But as I read that letter it felt as if the door of the world had cracked open again, ever so slightly.

I didn’t tell anyone I tried to kill myself. Something else I buried deep.

I often tell people that college saved me. Which in part is true. Rutgers, only an hour from my home by bus, was so far from my old life and so alive with possibility that for the first time in the longest I felt something approaching

safety, something approximating hope. And, whether it was that distance or my bottomless self-loathing or some desperate post-suicide urge to live, that first year I remade myself completely. By junior year, I doubt anyone from my high school would have recognized me. I became a runner, a weight lifter, an activist, had girlfriends, was “popular.” At Rutgers I buried not only the rape but the boy who had been raped—and threw into the pit my family, my suffering, my depression, my suicide attempt for good measure. Everything I’d been before Rutgers I locked behind an adamant mask of normalcy.

And, let me tell you, once that mask was on no power on earth could have torn it off me.

The mask was strong.

But as any Freudian will tell you trauma is stronger than any mask; it can’t be buried and it can’t be killed. It’s the revenant that won’t stop, the ghost that’s always coming for you. The nightmares, the intrusions, the hiding, the doubts, the confusion, the self-blame, the suicidal ideation—they didn’t go away just because I buried my neighborhood, my family, my face. The nightmares, the intrusions, the hiding, the doubts, the confusion, the self-blame, the suicidal ideation—they followed. All through college. All through graduate school. All through my professional life. All through my intimate life. (Leaked into my writing, too, but you’d be amazed how easy it is to rewrite the truth away.)

Didn’t matter how far I ran or what I achieved or who I was with—they followed.

Do you remember how during our chat at Amherst I talked about intimacy? I think I said that intimacy is our only home. Super ironic that I write and talk about intimacy all day long; it’s something I’ve always dreamed of and never had much luck achieving. After all, it’s hard to have love when you absolutely refuse to show yourself, when you’re locked behind a mask.

I remember when I got my first girlfriend, in college. I thought that was it—I was saved. Everything I’d been would officially be erased, all my awful dreams would disappear. But that’s not the way the world works. Me and this girl were into each other something serious, were



in our narrow college beds all the time—but you know what? We never had sex. Not once. I couldn't. Every time we would get close to fucking the intrusions would cut right through me, stomach-turning memories of my violation. Of course, I didn't tell her. I just said that I wanted to wait. She didn't believe my excuses, asked me what was wrong, but I never said anything. I kept the Silence. After a year, we broke up.

I thought maybe with another girl it would be easier, but it wasn't. I tried and I tried and I tried. Took me until I was a junior before I finally lost my virginity. I saw her first in a creative-writing class. She was an ex-hippie ex-hardcore sweetie who wrote beautifully and had a tattoo on her head and the first time we got in bed she didn't even ask if I was a virgin; she just pulled off her dress and it happened. I almost threw a party.

But I should have known it wasn't going to be that easy. Me and J—dated for two years, but I was always acting, always hiding. The mask was strong.

I'm sure she sensed I was all sorts of messed up, but I'm guessing she chalked it up to typical ghetto craziness. She loved the shit out of me. Brought me home to her family, and they loved me, too. It was the first truly healthy family I'd been exposed to. Which you would think would have been a good thing.

Wrong. The longer we were together, the more her family loved me, the more unbearable it all got. There was only so much closeness a person like me could endure before I needed to fly the fuck away. I had long bouts of depression, drank more than I'd ever drunk, especially during the holidays, when they were all at their happiest. One day, for no reason at all, I found myself saying, We have to break up. There was absolutely no precipitating anything. I had just reached my limit. I remember crying my eyes out the night before (in those days I never cried). I didn't want to break up with her. I didn't want to. But I couldn't stand to be loved. To be seen.

Why? she asked. Why?

And I really had no answer.

After that it was C—, who did a ton of community work in the D.R. And then B—, the Seventh-Day Adventist from St. Thomas. Neither relationship worked. But I kept going.

And that's how it went for a while, from college to grad school to Brooklyn. I would meet intimidatingly smart sisters, would date them in the hope that they could heal me, and then the fear would start to climb in me, the fear of discovery, and the mask would feel as if it were cracking and the impulse to escape, to hide, would grow until finally I'd hit a Rubicon—I'd either drive the novia away or I would run. I started sleeping around, too. The regular relationship drug wasn't enough. I needed stronger hits to keep the wound inside from rising up and devouring me. The Negro who couldn't sleep with anyone became the Negro who would sleep with everyone.

I was hiding, I was drinking, I was at the gym; I was running around with other women. I was creating model homes, and then, just as soon as they were up, abandoning them. Classic trauma psychology: approach and retreat, approach and retreat. And hurting other people in the process. My depressions would settle over me for months, and in that darkness the suicidal impulse would sprout pale and dead. I had friends with guns; I asked them never to bring them over for any reason. Sometimes they listened, sometimes they didn't.

Somehow I was still writing—about a young Dominican man who, unlike me, had been only a little molested. Someone who couldn't stay in any relationship because he was too much of a player. Crafting my perfect cover story, in effect. And since us Afro-Latinx brothers are viewed by society as always already sexual perils, very few people ever noticed what was written between the lines in my fiction—that Afro-Latinx brothers are often sexually *imperilled*.

Right before I left graduate school and moved to Brooklyn I published my first story, about a Dominican boy who goes to see another boy, whose face has been eaten off, and on the way he gets sexually assaulted. (Seriously.) And then in one of those insane twists of fortune I hit the literary lottery. From that one story I got an agent, I got a book deal, I appeared in *The New Yorker*, I published my first book, "Drown," which sold nothing but got me more press than any young writer should ever have. Anyone else

would have ridden that good-luck wave straight into the sunset, but that wasn't how it played out. I clearly wanted to be known, on some level, had been dying for a chance at a real face, but when that moment finally arrived I couldn't do it; I clamped the mask down hard. After "Drown," I could have stayed in N.Y.C., but I fled to Syracuse instead, where the snow never stops and the isolation was a maw. I stopped writing altogether.

Entire literary careers could have fit into the years I didn't write. In the meantime I met S—. If Black Is Beautiful had a spokesperson it would have been her; S—, who would have thrown away a thousand years of family to make it work. Didn't matter; we never were able to have sex. The intrusions always hit where it would hurt the worst. Never knew who I could have sex with and who I couldn't until I tried. S—found someone else, ended up marrying him. I moved on to other women. The years passed. I never took off the mask; I never got help.

And for a while the center held. For a while.

No one can hide forever. Eventually what used to hold back the truth doesn't work anymore. You run out of escapes, you run out of exits, you run out of gambits, you run out of luck. Eventually the past finds you.

What happened was that I met someone: Y—. In the novel I published eleven years after "Drown," I gave my narrator, Yuniór, a love supreme named Lola, because in real life I had a love supreme named Y—. She was the femme-matador of my dreams. A state-school girl raised in Washington Heights who worked her ass off, who never ran from a fight, and who could have danced Ochún out the fucking room.

We clicked like crazy. Like our ancestors were rooting for us. I was the Dominican nerdo she'd always dreamed about. She actually said this. She didn't have a clue. I fell into her family, and she fell into mine. And her mother—Dios mío, how the señora loved me. I was the son she never had. And before you could say "Run" I had created another one of my romance stories, but this one was more elaborate and more insane than any I'd ever spun. We bought

an apartment together in Harlem. We got engaged in Tokyo. We talked about having children together. Even the writing started coming again. Negroes I'd never met before were proud of our relationship and told us so. Two "successful" Dominicans from the hood who loved each other? As rare and as precious as ciguapas.

Of course, there were signs of trouble. I spent at least six months out of the year depressed and/or high or drunk. We could have sex but not often—the intrusions often jumped in, a hellish cock-blocking ménage à trois.

Sex or no sex, I "loved" her more than I had ever loved anyone. I even told her, in an unguarded moment, that something had happened in my past.

Something bad.

And because I "loved" her more than I had ever loved anyone, and because I had revealed to her what I revealed about my past, I cheated on her more than I had ever cheated on anyone.

I cheated on her como un maldito perro.

I knew plenty of men who lived double lives. Shit, my father had lived one, to my family's everlasting regret. And here I was playing out the patrimonial destiny. I had a double life like I was in a comic book.

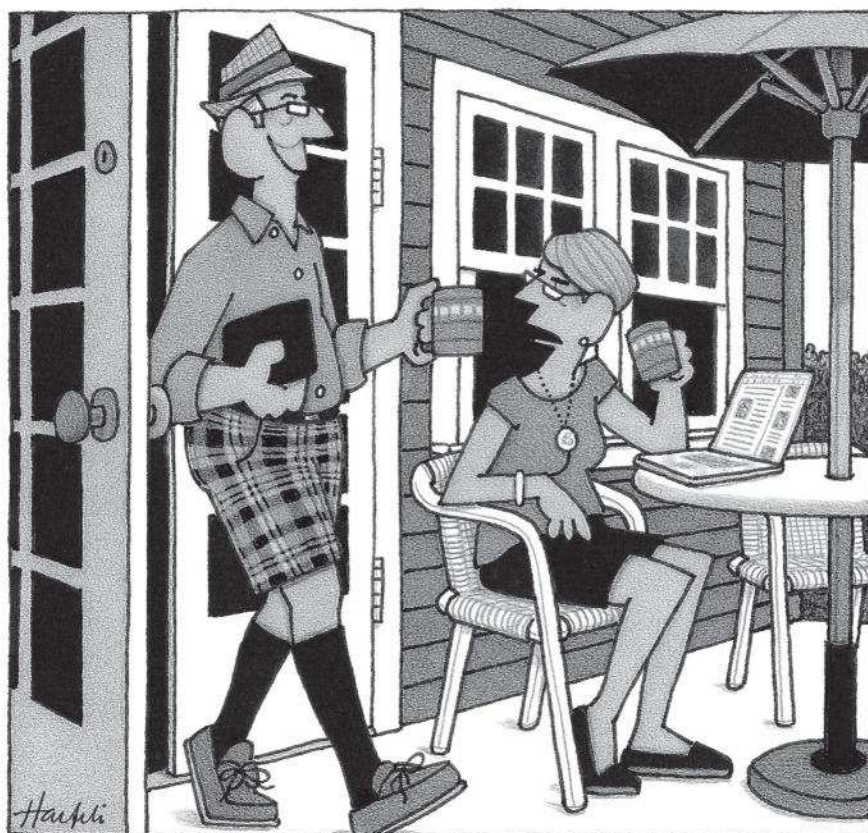
Y— got as much of the real me as I was capable of showing. She lived with my depression and my no-writing fury and with the rare moments of levity, of clarity. The other women saw primarily my mask, right before I ghosted them.

The mask was strong.

But no mask is that strong. No one's G that perfect. No one's love that dumb. One day Y— didn't like an answer I'd given her about where I'd been. I'm sure she'd been having doubts for a while—especially after one woman showed up at a reading of mine and burst into tears when I said hi. Y— decided to go snooping through my e-mails, and since I wasn't big on passwords or putting old e-mails in the trash it took her less than five minutes to find what she was looking for.

A heartbreak can take out a world. I know hers did. Took out her world and mine.

Another woman might have shot me dead on principle, but Y— simply printed out all the e-mails between me



*"Please tell me you're not going dapper in your old age."*

and all my other girls, all my bullshit seduction attempts, all the photos, had the evidence of my betrayals bound, and when I came home from one of my trips handed them to me.

When I realized what she'd given me I blacked out.

Which is what tends to happen when the world ends.

A few months later, I won the Pulitzer Prize for a novel narrated by a Dominican brother who loses the Dominican woman of his dreams because he can't stop cheating on her. When I found out I'd won the prize my first thought wasn't "I'm made" but "Maybe now she'll stay with me."

She didn't. A few months later Y— got her head together and kicked me out of her life completely. She kept the apartment, the ring, her family, our friends. I got Boston. We never saw each other again.

When I was a kid, I heard that dinosaurs were so big that even if they received a killing blow it would take a while for their nervous systems to figure

it out. That was me. After I lost Y— I moved to Cambridge full time, and for the next year or so I tried to "walk it off." For a little while I seriously thought I was going to be fine. The mask had exploded into fragments, but I kept trying to wear the pieces as if nothing had happened. It would have been comedic if it hadn't been so tragic. I tried to use sex to fill the hole I'd just blown through my heart, but it didn't work. Didn't stop me from trying.

I lost weeks, I lost months, I lost years (two). And then one day I woke up and literally couldn't move from bed. An archipelago of grief was on me, a wine-dark sea of pain. In a drunken fit I tried to jump from my friend's rooftop apartment in the D.R. He grabbed me before I could get my foot on a nearby stool and didn't let go until I stopped shaking.

In the treatment world, they say that often you have to hit rock bottom before you finally seek help. It doesn't always work that way, but that sure is how it was for me. I had to lose almost



everything and then some. And then some. Before I finally put out my hand.

I was fortunate. I had friends around me ready to step in. I had good university insurance. I stumbled upon a great therapist. She had dealt with people like me before, and she dedicated herself to my healing. It took years—hard, backbreaking years—but she picked up what there was of me. I don't think she'd ever met anyone more disinclined to therapy. I fought it every step of the way. But I kept coming, and she never gave up. After long struggle and many setbacks, my therapist slowly got me to put aside my mask. Not forever, but long enough for me to breathe, to live. And when I was finally ready to return to that place where I was unmade she stood by my side, she held my hand, and never let go.

I'd always assumed that if I ever returned to that place, that island where I'd been shipwrecked, I would never escape; I'd be dragged down and destroyed. And yet, irony of ironies, what awaited me on that island was not my destruction but nearly the opposite: my salvation.

During that time I wrote very little. Mostly I underlined passages in my favorite books. This line in particular I circled at least a dozen times: "Then darkness took me, and I strayed out of thought and time, and I wandered far on roads that I will not tell."

And then there was this section from my own novel:

Before all hope died I used to have this stupid dream that shit could be saved, that we would be in bed together like the old times, with the fan on, the smoke from our weed drifting above us, and I'd finally try to say words that could have saved us.

But before I can shape the vowels I wake up. My face is wet, and that's how you know it's never going to come true.

Never, ever.

It's been almost a decade since the Fall. I am not who I once was. I'm neither the brother who can't touch a girl nor the asshole who sleeps around. I'm in therapy twice a week. I don't drink (except in Japan, where I let myself have a beer). I don't hurt people with my lies or my choices, and wherever I can I make amends; I take re-

sponsibility. I've come to learn that repair is never-ceasing.

I'm even in a relationship, and she knows everything about my past. I told her about what happened to me.

I've told her, and I've told my friends. Even the toughest of my boys. I told them all, fuck the consequences.

Something I never thought possible.

So much has changed. But some things haven't. There are still times when the depression hammers down and months vanish out from under me, when the suicidal ideation returns. The writing hasn't come back, not really. But there are good stretches, and they are starting to outnumber the bad. Every year, I feel less like the dead, more a part of the living. The intrusions are fewer now, and when they come they don't throw me completely. I still have those horrible dreams every now and then, and they are still foul as fuck, but at least I have resources to deal with them.

And yet—

And yet despite all my healing I still feel that something important, something vital, has eluded me. The impulse to hide, to hold myself apart from my colleagues, from my fellow-writers, from my students, from the circle of life has remained uncannily strong. During the public talks I've given at universities and conferences, I've sometimes commented on the intergenerational harm that systemic sexual violence has inflicted on African diasporic communities, on my community. But have I ever actually come out and said that I was the victim of sexual violence? I've said elusive things here and there but nothing actionable, no definitive statements.

Over the last weeks, that gnawing sense of something undone has only grown, along with the old fear—the fear that someone might find out I'd been raped as a child. It's no coincidence that I recently began a tour for a children's book I've published and suddenly I'm surrounded by kids all the time and I've had to discuss my childhood more than I ever have in my life. I've found myself telling lies, talking about a kid that never was. He never checks the locks on the bedroom doors four times a night, doesn't bite clean through his tongue. The cover stories

are returning. There are even mornings when my face feels stiff.

And then at one of my events, another signing line—this one at the Brattle Theatre, in Cambridge—a young woman walked up and started to thank me for my novel, for one of its protagonists, Beli. Beli, the tough-love Dominican mother who suffered catastrophic sexual abuse throughout her life.

I had a life a lot like Beli's, the young woman said, and then, without warning, she choked into tears. She wanted to say more to me, but before she could she was overwhelmed and fled. I could have tried to stop her. I could have called after her me too me too. I could have said the words: I was also raped.

But I didn't have the courage. I turned to the next person in line and smiled.

And you know what? It felt good to be behind the mask. It felt like home.

I think about you, X—. I think about that woman from the Brattle. I think about silence; I think about shame, I think about loneliness. I think about the hurt I caused. I think of all the years and all the life I lost to the hiding and to the fear and to the pain. The mask got more of me than I ever did. But mostly I think about what it felt like to say the words—to my therapist, all those years ago; to tell my partner, my friends, that I'd been raped. And what it feels like to say the words here, where the whole world—and maybe you—might hear.

Toni Morrison wrote, "Anything dead coming back to life hurts." In Spanish we say that when a child is born it is given the light. And that's what it feels like to say the words, X—. Like I'm being given a second chance at the light.

Last night I had another dream. It wasn't a bad one. I was young. Just a boy. No one had hurt me yet. A plane was dropping flyers announcing an upcoming Jack Veneno match, and all of us kids in Villa Juana were racing about in great excitement, gathering the flyers in our arms.

I barely remember that boy anymore, but for a brief moment I am him again, and he is me. ♦



# TAKE MY GLOBALIST WIFE

BY IAN FRAZIER

Two globalists are walking down the street. They're hungry, because of the patriotic tariff on foreign foods, and they're trying to find a way to get some money. They pass a First Baptist Pentecostal Non-Globalist Church of the Redeemer, and they see a big sign: "CONVERT TO OUR FAITH AND WE WILL PAY YOU \$100 CASH." The first globalist says to the second globalist, "Oh, I could never do that. They don't believe in globalism." The second globalist says, "Well, that's fine for you to say, but I could sure use that hundred bucks." So he goes in, and the first globalist waits for him on the sidewalk, and after a while the second globalist comes out. The first globalist asks him, "So, how did it go? Did you get the money?" The second globalist looks at him and says, "Is that all you globalists ever think about?"

A Catholic priest, a Buddhist monk, and a globalist former Presidential adviser are in a lifeboat. The Catholic priest says, "Let us all pray together to our divine Father, and a ship will come along and rescue us." The Buddhist monk says, "Let us all meditate together on the sublime Buddha's embodiment of the oneness of all being, and a ship will come along and rescue us." And the globalist former Presidential adviser says, "I don't know about you guys, but I'm returning to my previous job at Goldman Sachs!"

A globalist goes to work for his father-in-law, who happens to be a non-globalist, and, after he's been working for him for about a year, the globalist arrives at the office and discovers that his special V.I.P. parking permit has been cancelled. So the globalist goes to his father-in-law and asks him, "Why was my special V.I.P. parking permit cancelled? Does the fact that I'm a globalist have anything to do with it?" The father-in-law stares at him for a long time. Then he says, "Of course not! I have some very, very close friends who are globalists."

A globalist economist is sitting in his shop on the Lower East Side, making international trade agreements, when a customer comes in very upset and says, "I have a complaint about this international trade agreement you made for me." The globalist economist looks up from his international-trade-agreement-making bench, adjusts his spectacles, and says, "Come back Monday, when I will be at Davos."

A globalist mother and her son are at the beach. The son goes in for a swim, and suddenly he starts to drown. The globalist mother screams, "Save my boy! Save my boy!" A lifeguard jumps in, battles the powerful riptides, and almost drowns himself. After a terrific struggle, he saves the son, and he car-

ries him to the globalist mother. She looks at her son and says to the lifeguard, "He had a hat." So the globalist mother and her son sue the lifeguard and win a huge settlement from an ultra-liberal proactive globalist judge at the World Court, in The Hague.

A representative of the Deep State is handing out leaflets on a corner in the garment district. He stops a man and says, "Excuse me, sir, are you a globalist?" The man replies, "I'm a furrier." The representative of the Deep State says, "Yes, but are you a globalist?" The furrier becomes angry and shouts at him, "Numbskull, I told you I'm a furrier! When did you ever meet a furrier who *wasn't* a globalist?"

A young globalist woman and a young cosmopolite man fall in love and decide to get married. The parents of the globalist woman want to meet the parents of the cosmopolite groom, so they all go out to dinner, and the parents of the globalist woman ask the cosmopolite parents, "And how do you want our grandchildren to be raised—as globalists or as cosmopolites?" There is a long silence. Finally, the waiter, who has overheard the conversation, interrupts: "Forgive me for putting in my two cents, and please excuse my ignorance, but aren't globalists and cosmopolites pretty much the same thing?"

My globalist mother-in-law is so unpatriotic. She says to me, "Do you want to be an internationalist citizen of the world? Or do you want to spend the rest of your life sitting in your Buick in Mamaroneck?" And talk about elitist! My globalist mother-in-law is so elitist, she plays mah-jongg with Kristalina Georgieva, the C.E.O. of the World Bank! And out of touch with the real America? You gotta be kidding me! My globalist mother-in-law is so out of touch with the real America that, when I tell her I'm going to Pocatello, Idaho, on a business trip, she says, "Pocatello? You mean the Italian handbag designer?" Don't get me started.

Take my globalist wife—please! Or, for the strict globalists who speak only Esperanto: *Prenu mian tutmondisman edzinon—bonvole!* ♦



## GAME PLAN

*How far can Becky Hammon go in the N.B.A.?*

BY LOUISA THOMAS

**I**t was August, 2012, and Becky Hammon, the point guard of the Silver Stars, San Antonio's franchise in the W.N.B.A., was on her way home from the London Olympics. While waiting to board a connecting flight in Atlanta, she spotted the craggy face of Gregg Popovich, the head coach of the N.B.A.'s San Antonio Spurs. Popovich is widely considered one of the greatest coaches of all time, and is known for a capacity to inspire selfless team play even among players of colossal ego. One of his many fans, Barack Obama, has said that if he were a free agent in the N.B.A. he'd sign with Popovich. Hammon was far less famous, but Popovich was an admirer, and he recognized her, too. He had been watching her play since 2007,

the year before she led the Silver Stars to the W.N.B.A. Finals. From time to time during the next few seasons, Popovich would call or text Dan Hughes, the Silver Stars' coach, with comments about her performance.

Though only five feet six, Hammon was a commanding presence on the court: gum-snapping, energetic, her quick cuts and jab steps to the basket punctuated by a swishing ponytail. She could slip through a narrow space between two defenders and drive to the hoop, scooping a shot that would skim the rim and slide through the net. Like Magic Johnson, she flipped no-look passes over her shoulder, and, like Stephen Curry, she hit shots from half-court. But Popovich was most struck by her prowess as a

court general: she had an uncanny ability to direct her teammates around the floor. "I'd watch the game, and the only thing I could see—it's an exaggeration, I mean, but—was Becky's aura, her leadership, her effect on teammates, her effect on the crowd, the way she handled herself," Popovich told me. "She was, like, the ultimate leader. Energy, juice, vitality. At the same time, she was doing intelligent things on the court, making decisions that mattered." In the N.B.A., a woman in charge was almost unthinkable, but he was considering hiring her.

Hammon and Popovich managed to sit together on the flight to San Antonio. They talked until the plane touched down, but not about basketball. He wasn't interested in whether she could diagram a play. Popovich has a more character-driven view of coaching—and of coaches. "I wanted to find out who she was," he said. "What did she think? How intelligent is she? How worldly? What goes through her mind? My ulterior motive, if that's the way to put it, was that I wanted to find out whether she had the interest and the tools to be a leader, to run a team."



*Hammon joined the San Antonio Spurs as an assistant coach in 2014. "I think she's a star," Gregg Popovich says.*

Rebecca Lynn Hammon, who is now forty-one, was born in Rapid City, South Dakota. She has a heart-shaped face framed by chestnut hair that falls below her shoulders, and she speaks in a cheerful, sincere voice with a Midwestern accent. She was raised, and remains, a devout Christian. She is unapologetically American. And yet at the London Olympics, she told Popovich, she had played in a red uniform for the Russian Federation. Four years earlier, she'd been passed over for the U.S. team's first round of tryouts for the Beijing Olympics, and Russia had offered her a spot on its national team; she also played in a Russian league. Popovich, who had been a Soviet-studies major at the Air Force Academy, was fascinated. He told Hammon about touring the Soviet Union with the U.S. Armed Forces basketball team in the seventies, and, as she drank a beer, she told him what it was like to live in Moscow and to lead players who were, at first, wary of an American teammate. "I was a proud, arrogant American," she later recounted. "But, at the end of the day, you live in the world with billions of people, and everyone has a unique upbringing and experience." Hammon had become a naturalized Russian citizen in order to play in Moscow—a difficult decision. Some Americans called her a traitor. Even the U.S. head coach, Anne Donovan, said that she was unpatriotic, though later she backed off, saying, "I hold no grudge, and more power to her."

As their flight neared its end, Popovich could barely conceal his interest. He said, "So, if I ever hired you and I asked you something, you'd tell me the truth?"

Hammon found the question curious. "I don't know why else you'd ask if you didn't want me to tell the truth," she said.

"Good," he said. "I don't want a bunch of yes-men."

The following year, Hammon suffered a torn A.C.L., a season-ending injury. While she recovered, she asked Popovich whether she could sit in on a few Spurs practices. The team is famously reluctant to grant access to outsiders, but he agreed. Soon, she was attending coaches' meetings and film sessions, analyzing games and discussing strategy. To the untutored eye, basketball seems infinitely more improv-

sational than football, in which each play is conveyed in a kind of committee meeting, the huddle. And yet both the offensive and the defensive sides of basketball involve extensive planning and preparation. The most gifted coaches, like Popovich—or, in their time, Red Auerbach, of the Celtics; Red Holzman, of the Knicks; and Phil Jackson, of the Lakers and the Bulls—can make even the greatest soloists harmonize with their teammates. By the end of the season, in the spring of 2014, Popovich noticed that Hammon was confident enough to argue with him about the finer points of, say, offensive ball movement and floor spacing. "That's when I knew, if I had an opportunity, I wanted to put her on staff," Popovich said.

That summer, Hammon retired from the W.N.B.A., and the Spurs announced that they had hired her as an assistant coach, making her the first full-time female coach in big-time American men's sports. Popovich and his general manager, R. C. Buford, insist that they had no intention of making a political statement. "It has nothing to do with her being a woman. She *happens* to be a woman," Popovich said.

But professional sports are the last major area of American culture in which the segregation of the sexes is not only tolerated but sanctioned. On the field, the ice, and the court, the reasons are obvious: differences in size and strength can make it difficult for female athletes to compete against their male counterparts. In the famed Battle of the Sexes, in 1973, Billie Jean King caused a sensation when she crushed Bobby Riggs, but King, at twenty-nine, was in her prime, while Riggs was fifty-five. Few, if any, tennis fans believe that King could have defeated Jimmy Connors or Arthur Ashe. But sex discrimination on the sidelines is also taken as a matter of course—at least when it comes to women coaching men. (Men coaching women is common in the professional and the college ranks.) On social media and sports talk radio, the reasons that women could never coach men are presented as if they were as inevitable as differences in testosterone levels: women won't tolerate the locker-room culture; men's teams are "more athletic" than women's, making them incomprehensible to the female imagination; and women simply cannot

command young men. Mike Francesa, one of the most popular sports-radio hosts in the country, once said of Hammon, "What would qualify her to be a coach, on a professional level, of a men's team?" He added, "It's not even something that would make sense to aspire to." Nearly half a century after Title IX, the belief persists: women cannot coach men, particularly at the professional level.

By hiring Hammon, Popovich challenged the idea that the best male athletes in the world would be diminished by the leadership of a woman. "I was, like, Hallelujah," Julie Foudy, a former captain of the U.S. women's national soccer team and an ESPN analyst, told me. Also among those who cheered the decision was Adam Silver, the slender, savvy lawyer who has been the commissioner of the N.B.A. since 2014. While the N.F.L. struggles to position itself between its activist players and its more conservative fans, Silver has expressed a desire to make the N.B.A. progressive and inclusive—a league of the woke. Silver first made his political mark by forcing out the owner of the L.A. Clippers, who had been caught on tape making racist remarks. Silver has supported star players like LeBron James and Stephen Curry in criticizing Donald Trump. Two years ago, Popovich attended New York's gay-pride parade and saw Silver riding an N.B.A. float. In October, Silver hired a retired Air Force lieutenant general named Michelle D. Johnson as the head of referee operations. "It's not inclusion for its own sake, or diversity for its own sake," he told me. "It's the consequence of expanding the pool of candidates." Last year, he said that he expected to see a female head coach "sooner rather than later."

James said last week that he and his teammates on the Cleveland Cavaliers would welcome a female head coach. "If she knows what she's doing, we'll love it," he said. "I mean, listen, at the end of the day, basketball, it's not about male or female. If you know the game, you know the game." Many people speculate that Hammon will be the N.B.A.'s first female head coach, not least because she has Popovich's support. Talking to Hammon, though, I was struck by her ambivalence about her role as a pioneer. She recognizes that she is an inspiration for many young women,





*"We'll begin boarding our first-class passengers after a ten-minute pause in honor of the even wealthier people who fly in private jets."*

and a target for many wary men. At the same time, she resists the attention to her gender. "If you don't want a female coach, don't hire one!" she said, with some exasperation. But, she continued, if "you want to hire somebody who's qualified and will do a good job, then maybe you should consider me." Like Popovich, Hammon believes that coaching involves more than drawing up plays or breaking down defensive schemes. "You shouldn't get into coaching unless you care about the people you're leading," she said. That doesn't fit the popular image of a successful coach—your Belichick and Lombardis. But it is, as it happens, the philosophy of the Spurs.

As a kid growing up in South Dakota, Becky Hammon had two great passions. One was basketball. When she was a toddler, she learned to dribble. She later played for hours with a Nerf ball and a small hoop nailed to a door, battling her older brother and her father, who played on his knees. When she was older, the games moved to the driveway, where there was a hoop

mounted to the deck. Her parents installed floodlights so that games could go into the night. From the age of ten, she took hundreds of shots a day. "Playing basketball for me is like breathing," she said.

Her other passion was her faith. Every Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday night, the family attended services at an evangelical church. When Hammon was seven, the church showed a movie based on the Rapture, called "A Thief in the Night." She thought of being separated from her family, and she was terrified. Soon after, she went to the front of the church and declared that she had accepted Christ into her heart.

Becky's mother was convinced that she would become a minister or a missionary. Becky wanted to play in the N.B.A. Her father had to tell her, gently, that it wouldn't happen—but she might aim for a college scholarship. Even that seemed unlikely. Hammon was under five feet until around eighth grade, and a growth spurt sputtered out at five feet six. "I'll never be able to compete athletically," she remembers realizing,

"so I have to learn how to beat people with my mind."

She told me that Christianity gave her "courage and comfort," a sense that there was a purpose to her life. "You can't separate the two," she said, of her faith and basketball, as we sat in the kitchen of the Spurs' training facility, in San Antonio. "It would be like trying to strain my white blood cells from my red blood cells. It would be like trying to separate my personality from my soul."

At Stevens High School in Rapid City, Hammon became the school's all-time leader in scoring, assists, and steals, and she was voted South Dakota's Player of the Year. There was no clear road from Rapid City to a top college program, but, after Hammon's junior year, she got a break. She was invited to an elite training camp in Terre Haute, Indiana. Soon, it was clear to everyone there that the diminutive guard with the long ponytail could shoot.

One of the people watching was an assistant coach at Colorado State, who reported back to the head coach, Greg Williams. Williams went to Rapid City to watch Hammon play; he then offered her a full scholarship. "Though she was not arrogant, she believed in herself," he told me. In 1995, when Hammon started her freshman year at Colorado State, the team had rarely finished a season with a winning record. During her senior year, the team finished 33-3 and made the Sweet Sixteen in the N.C.A.A. tournament. "Nothing bothered her," Williams said. "Becky always wanted to take the tough shot." She became the school's all-time leader in points, assists, and threes, and the leading scorer, male or female, in Western Athletic Conference history.

When Hammon graduated, the W.N.B.A. was in its third season. It was not the first women's professional basketball league, but it was the starriest, with N.C.A.A. and Olympic legends like Lisa Leslie, Rebecca Lobo, and Sheryl Swoopes, and it had the full backing of the N.B.A. On the W.N.B.A.'s draft day, Hammon was in Fort Collins, waiting for her agent to call; the phone didn't ring. There had been an influx of established players as a rival

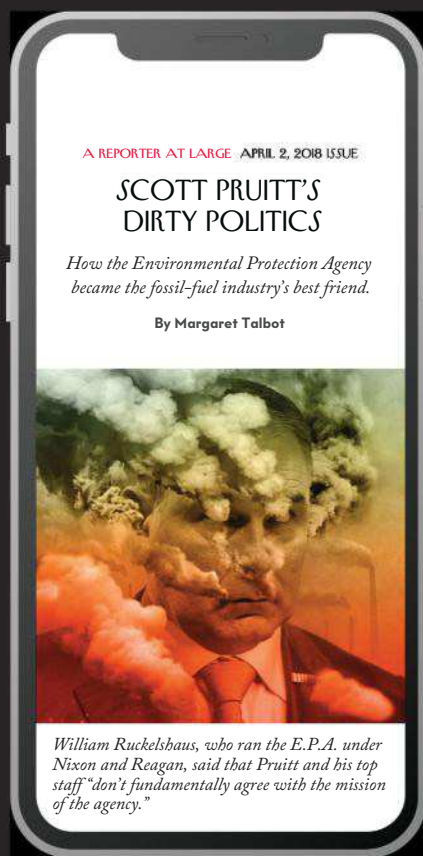
league folded, but the real problem was that Hammon was considered too small to compete. Though she wasn't drafted, the New York Liberty offered her a spot at its training camp, where not every player would make the team. She survived the cuts and signed a contract for twenty-five thousand dollars.

The Liberty had some of the best players in the league, like Teresa Weatherspoon, an energetic ball handler, and Vickie Johnson, a silky-smooth scorer. Hammon challenged herself to match up against them in practice. Before long, she had made herself indispensable as a substitute player, coming off the bench to score and to guide the team. In 2003, she became the starting point guard. "Her size never mattered," the Liberty's head coach, Richie Adubato, said. "When she drove to the basket, it didn't matter who was in there. She had one shot blocked, I think, in four years."

In 2007, the San Antonio Silver Stars traded for her. Dan Hughes, the coach, would watch her take on multiple opponents and think, She's in trouble—we're in trouble. Then he came to appreciate how "she'd hang in the air longer, create spin, and hit the corner on the backboard," and he began looking forward to seeing how she got out of such situations. "I became a fan," he said.

Hammon became one of the most popular players in the W.N.B.A., but the league struggled financially. Since its promising first years, many teams have lost money; several have been moved or shuttered. In the W.N.B.A., players' annual salaries max out at just over a hundred thousand dollars; in the N.B.A., the minimum is more than five hundred thousand, and stars make tens of millions, never mind endorsement money. W.N.B.A. players routinely spend about half the year overseas, where private patrons or wealthy corporations back teams as vanity projects. In 2007, Hammon was making about ninety-five thousand dollars a year, then the W.N.B.A.'s maximum salary, when C.S.K.A., a Russian team, offered her a four-year deal worth around two million dollars. As part of the deal, Hammon would become a Russian citizen; the rules of the Russian Premier League prevent teams from

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fielding more than two American players.

While Hammon was negotiating her contract with C.S.K.A., she learned that the U.S. Olympic team had not invited her to its first round of tryouts. The exclusion reinforced the idea she had about herself. "I've always been on the outside looking in," she said. "The kid not picked." The Russian national team asked her to play for them, and she accepted the offer. She wanted to play in the Olympics, and Washington's political relations with Moscow were not nearly as fraught as they are now. "This is basketball, it isn't the Cold War," she said at the time.

She moved to Moscow for the C.S.K.A. season in 2007, and began training with the national team in 2008. She spent seven months a year abroad for the next six years, until she started working with the Spurs. "I was an outsider," Hammon told me. "They looked at me with one eyebrow"—she cocked hers. Anna Petrakova, who played with Hammon on C.S.K.A. and the national team, told me, "When people come to Russia, they always seem a little stand-offish. They don't always integrate in the culture." Hammon was different. "She just came with an open heart." Hammon learned a little Russian, and at games she enthusiastically fumbled her way through the national anthem.

Many people thought that Hammon was naïve, or worse. Some American players called her disloyal. Far more painful for Hammon was the reaction at home, in South Dakota. "I come from a red state, where it's God, country, family," she told me. "I got my mom calling me on the phone saying, 'You don't understand people of my generation,'" and crying every time they spoke. Before that, she'd been the spirited point guard, the All-Star everyone loved. Now everyone was questioning her. "I took a beating," she said.

At the Summer Games in Beijing, in August, 2008, the U.S. beat Russia in the semifinals. After the game, Lisa Leslie, one of the most decorated Olympic basketball players, refused to shake Hammon's hand. The U.S. went on to win the finals. At the medal ceremony, Hammon stood on the lowest step of the podium, in her Russian uniform, a bronze medal around her neck. When the American national anthem played, she placed her hand on her heart. Still, she was proud of the Russian national team, and of her ability to integrate with the players. Hammon told me, "I'm Russian to them, and it has nothing to do with the passport I'm holding."

"I think that journey helped prepare

me to do things that people hadn't done," she said. "It helped me take a lot of crap. It helped build something inside me."

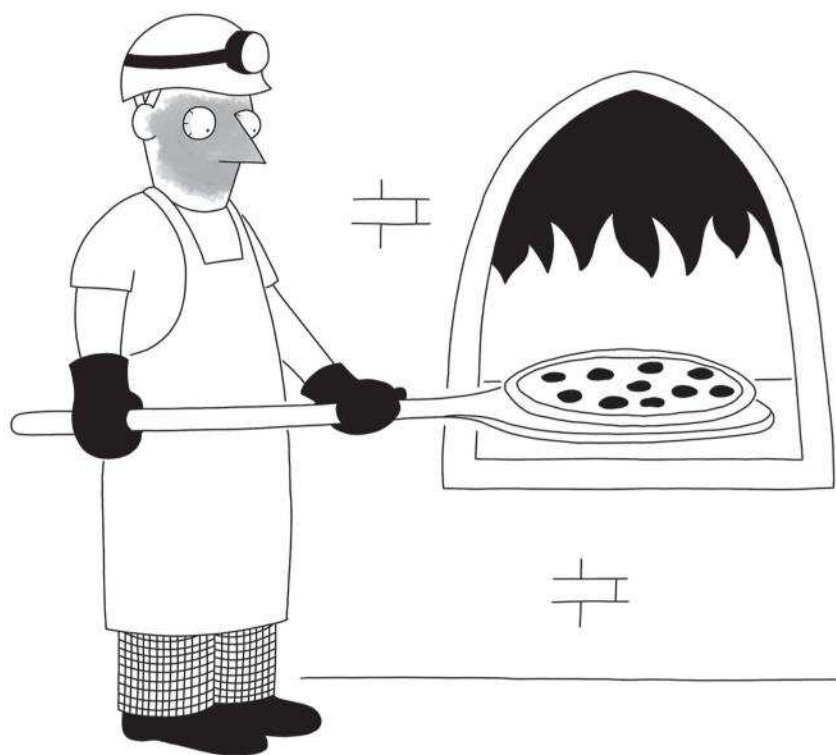
When Hammon began observing Spurs practices, she assumed that it would help her get a job with a college team or in the W.N.B.A. "Coaching women, that's where my mind-set was the whole time," she said. Then, one night at dinner, Tony Parker, the Spurs' point guard, who is a close friend of Hammon—"She's sort of like my big sister," he told me—said that he thought Popovich might hire her. "Really?" she replied.

"It was almost like a perfect match, because Pop likes to try stuff," Parker recalled. "I thought it would be perfect for those two to get together—great basketball minds." He had no doubt that she would be accepted by the other players. "She had the support of the point guard, so she's good," he added with a smile.

Popovich and Buford, the Spurs' general manager, watched how she behaved in meetings and interacted with players on the floor. Tim Duncan, one of the game's greatest power forwards, is known to be exceptionally reticent. Parker once said that, during his first season, Duncan didn't even speak to him. Hammon realized that she would have to break through with Duncan over time, and off the court. "Let's be real," she said, and laughed. "I was not sitting there trying to give Timmy extra tips."

"With a new job, when you go, you shut up," Popovich said. "You don't try to prove to people how smart you are, or that you have better ideas. She was cognizant of that sort of managerial thing." In August, 2014, the Spurs offered Hammon the job as an assistant coach.

The announcement was greeted with fanfare. President Obama tweeted his congratulations. The mainstream media ran complimentary coverage. "No one is going to come up and say, 'I'm so pissed you got that job, I can't believe it,'" Hammon said. "There's certain noise that I know goes on, but no one ever says it, because it's not the politically correct thing to say." Players and opposing coaches were, for the most part, encouraging. Stars like LeBron



COAL-FIRED PIZZA

sdg

James and Chris Paul told her that they were happy she was hired. Last week, James told reporters, “You guys know how fond I am of Coach Pop, so for him to bring Becky in there, to be able to be an assistant and give her input—I don’t quite know how much input she has, I’m not there on a day-to-day basis—but just having her face there, it means a lot.”

Jeff Van Gundy, the former coach of the New York Knicks and the Houston Rockets and a commentator on ESPN, told me, “I’m not the social conscience of the N.B.A. I’m also not the most enlightened. Twenty years ago, I would have laughed at the notion of a female assistant or head coach. But I think we are becoming a more enlightened league. I think coaches are. But you know who doesn’t get enough credit? Players. I think they have really made incredible progress.”

Most of the criticism came from the noisiest and nastiest corners of talk radio and social media. At Hammon’s first press conference after her hiring, a reporter read her an anonymous e-mail that called it a publicity stunt, and suggested that the only thing the players had to learn from her was advice on baking cookies. “People are, like, ‘What do you say to that?’” Hammon said. “At the end of the day, you have to say, ‘So what’s the truth in that? Is that true? No, it’s not.’ So I have no comment to that—other than, I make good chocolate-chip cookies. That’s a fact.”

This has not been an easy year for the Spurs. The team’s longtime stars are aging or retired, and its M.V.P. candidate, Kawhi Leonard, has been out with a quadriceps injury for all but nine games. Still, throughout the regular season, the Spurs remained on track to make the playoffs for the twenty-first straight time. Since Popovich became coach, in 1996, they have won five championships, and from 2000 to 2017 they had eighteen consecutive fifty-win seasons—a stretch of excellence that is nearly unparalleled in sports. There are plenty of factors that explain their success: a keen eye for talent abroad, a famed analytics department, and the good fortune of drafting Duncan. But there is something more: the team ethos—selfless play above all—instilled

by Popovich and known around San Antonio as “the Spurs way.”

Because of their success, the Spurs have not been eligible for the highest picks in the draft. Instead of relying on college superstars, they have built their team through some crafty trades and by pushing their young players to the limit. They scout top international players—like Parker, from France, and Manu Ginóbili, from Argentina—and sign N.B.A. veterans like Pau Gasol, from Spain, who is thirty-seven but can anchor a defense and move in a way that creates space on the floor; they also, as in the case of Leonard, hone the raw athletic talent of less experienced players. When the Spurs are at their best, the ball moves fluidly and freely. Duncan, who retired in 2016 and was perhaps the least flashy major star in the N.B.A., was emblematic of the team’s unselfish style. On a given night, almost anyone on the roster can be the leading scorer.

Popovich rejects the idea of winning at all costs. “We want to win the right way, we want to lose the right way,” he told me. At the team’s first film session after losing to the Miami Heat in the N.B.A. Finals in 2013, Popovich reviewed the team’s mistakes and then said, “Gentlemen, if this is the worst thing that ever happens to you in your life, your life is going to be a breeze.” During games, he’ll call a quick time-out to shout at a player, or bench someone for playing badly. But off the court he does not talk about staying focussed or decry “distractions.” To the contrary, he tends to talk politics with his players, his coaches, and reporters. He once brought in John Carlos, the sprinter who gave a Black Power salute from the Olympic podium, to speak to the team. Two days before the 2014 N.B.A. Finals, when the team gathered in the video room, he displayed a photograph of Eddie Mabo, an Australian indigenous-land-rights activist. A few weeks ago, the Spurs travelled to D.C. to play the Washington Wizards, in a game that had implications for the playoffs. While they were in town, Popovich took them to visit the Supreme Court.

“Everybody talks about everything ad nauseam,” Popovich told me. “I’m sure the coaches are, like, ‘Oh, my God,



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Mick Stevens, December 17, 1979

THE NEW YORKER



can't we just play basketball?' I think it's a huge part of what we do, because it helps them love each other, it helps them feel responsible to each other, it helps them want to work for and with each other—and it helps them understand that when they're thirty-two or thirty-five or thirty-seven their life starts all over again, and it's probably not going to have anything to do with basketball. They need to know what they're walking into, and what kind of social system we have, and what kind of world we live in, because they're going to be raising kids by then, too. And it's important to have your self-image be much more, and hopefully have basketball be a small part of who they are when they're done with this."

Popovich's rules include: don't skip steps, have a sense of humor, and get over yourself. These rules are another way of reaching the equilibrium between humility and self-confidence which Hammon first found through faith. Popovich said, "She knows what she knows and she knows what she doesn't, and, what she doesn't know, she gets her ass in the film room, or nails down one of the other coaches." He added, "I think she's a star."

When Becky Hammon played basketball, she was known as a shooter, but she loved passing. It was her way of dictating the game while getting others involved. Now she charts the Spurs' passes in order to see which ones lead to scoring. It isn't her primary responsibility—like other assistants, she is responsible for scouting and for helping to game-plan for a list of opposing teams—but it calls on her experience as a point guard.

At first, the aim was to get a picture of the pace of the game: Hammon would note each time the team pushed the ball down the court. Then the project evolved. How many times did they kick it out of the post? How often did wheeling it around the perimeter lead to an open shot? These days, all the top teams emphasize passing. But, with Leonard out, it has been especially important for the Spurs. So the coaches focus on reading defenses and baiting opposing players, trying to set up an open shot. They have heated debates about spacing on the court.

## SPOILER

Was born a shamble. Was raised, as many, by a marrow & a follow.  
Made first fortune before first word. Had it made. Follow left

The house each morning. Marrow worked to the bone. One  
Sinister, one borrow I loved more than my own stalled self;

Early knew for certain one tomorrow I'd make a great ain't. I  
Lived from we to we. Tried to save my crumpled singles. Put on

*A bold lip*, pulled firm on my love like hinging down  
A set of attic stairs. What a racket. What a small cord

Attaches us. My heart, still the spelling bee I throw each time  
On purpose: we had words, then slept like ice in the slit

Of a tucked top sheet. After a spell, sure I slow-ached, sulked  
My way awake. Once upon a table: coffee with chicory & make-

Shift bliss. My eyes, bigger than blue-plates—truth, it was almost  
Too much to swallow. Took it to go. Clocked myself out. A time

Popovich and Buford told me that Hammon is an effective coach because of her "basketball I.Q." But she is also adept at the human elements of the game. When she started working with the Spurs, she noticed how Duncan communicated with his teammates nonverbally. "His leadership—if you go back, you see Tim is touching people all the time," she said. She talked about the impact of Ginóbili, who is forty: "Even if Manu never steps onto the court this year, the way he understands culture and brings people together—it's always about the team." This year, the Spurs have been tested by Leonard's absence and by tensions over when and whether he might return. But part of a coach's job is to deal with the unexpected, and to fix relationships when they break down. Lately, the team has been carried by thirty-two-year-old LaMarcus Aldridge. By the end of last season, Aldridge was so frustrated that he asked for a trade. Instead, he and Popovich talked through their differences. "Maybe what worked for Tim Duncan wasn't working for LaMarcus," Hammon said.

Hammon fits in with the Spurs' cooperative mentality. "She's committed, she's passionate, she's smart, she's worldly," Ginóbili said. Some of her reputation

comes from her accomplishments as a player. The W.N.B.A. has had trouble getting traction with N.B.A. fans, but many N.B.A. players follow the league with respect. Jonathon Simmons, who left the Spurs last year, for the Orlando Magic, said in 2015 that Hammon is a "players' coach." He told me that he meant it literally: "She once was a player, so she understands, she relates."

Of course, players talking to a female reporter about the first female coach are unlikely to offer skepticism, and it is easy to find examples of sexism and even alleged sexual violence within the N.B.A. In October, 2016, the former Chicago Bulls point guard Derrick Rose, now with the Minnesota Timberwolves, was tried and cleared in a rape case. Rose testified that, at a 2008 N.B.A. rookie-orientation program, he was told not to leave behind used condoms, reportedly saying, "You never know what women are up to nowadays." (A spokesperson for the N.B.A. said that players were instructed on how to dispose of condoms, but not because of concerns about exploitation by women.) In February, more than a dozen current and former Dallas Mavericks employees told *Sports Illustrated* that it was an "open secret" that the team's former president sexually harassed employees

Or two had my lights knocked out, my knee socks knocked off,  
But soft. But still—a ceiling fan, a sill, & a souse who hung

On my every world. No two ways about it; I fell for us, hot &  
Mussed as all get out. Took my Eastern time across to the Pacific,

Doubled down & doubled back. Put my face in the path  
Of another's full-palmed slap—struck by how dumb I was

Struck. Inked myself clear until I was sure as sure was  
Numb. Got my house in order but never quite could give up

The drink, the way it confects me, the way I stay spoked  
With what wrecks me. Curled myself all the way inside

The inside of our last joke, the punched line we lured  
The most, as thicket as our thievery, our ashed plot

Unfallowing me like a neck's own woods toward a choice  
Choke of light: I can't imagine, I reckon I can only imagine.

—Amy Woolard

and that the management tolerated sexual harassment and domestic violence. (The former president has denied the allegations.) In response to the article, the Mavericks announced that they had suspended one employee, terminated another, and hired outside counsel to investigate the allegations.

When I asked Hammon about the Mavericks allegations, she said, "The culture of sports has been 'He's acting like a boy.' What does that mean? You're acting like an animal? There needs to be boundaries. There needs to be an environment where everyone can succeed."

Some people talk about Hammon's career as though it were a quick fix for sexism in the N.B.A. Instead of calling for more women to be hired, they focus on the advancement of this particular woman. It's a little like assuming that Barack Obama's Presidency would end American racism. In fact, Hammon's success has not yet led to many more coaching opportunities for women. In 2015, the Sacramento Kings hired Nancy Lieberman, a former head coach in the W.N.B.A. and in the N.B.A.'s development league, as a full-time assistant. (She was recently named a head coach in Ice Cube's Big3 league, featuring retired N.B.A. play-

ers.) Last October, the Kings also hired Jenny Boucek, another former W.N.B.A. head coach, as an assistant. But no other franchises have followed suit. "When ten other teams have a Becky Hammon, that will tell me the culture is changing," Popovich said.

The big question for Hammon, Popovich told me, is "Is this going to end up being something? Is she going to be able to matriculate and get into a head-coaching position?" Hammon is still early in her career, and it could take some time. "Some people are in the league fifteen, twenty years before they get into a head-coaching position, if they do at all," Popovich said. "I tell her, very straightforwardly, I don't know. Because I look at our country, and I have all kinds of doubts about all kinds of things, let alone whether she's going to be a head coach." Steve Kerr, the head coach of the Golden State Warriors, said last week, about the possibility of a female head coach, "I don't know if it's going to happen soon. Becky Hammon would be the one you'd say right away who could possibly get an interview."

In 2015, Hammon served as the Spurs' head coach in the N.B.A.'s summer league, in Las Vegas, and won the championship. It was not a rare accom-

plishment for an assistant coach, but it was a significant one. Afterward, a former N.B.A. executive indicated in a tweet that if he were a general manager he would want to hire Hammon as head coach. Jeff Van Gundy told me, "I called him up and said, 'Bullshit you would. Because you don't know her, and that would be your one shot. I would like to think you would, but no way.' I think it's going to take someone like Pop—who's entrenched, who has great job security—to pull that trigger. You're not going to see someone who has his job on the line. Is that fair? No. Is that reality for Becky? Yeah."

For Hammon to be hired as a head coach, Popovich said, "it's going to take somebody who has some guts, some imagination, and is not driven by old standards and old forms." He went on, "If somebody is smart, it's actually a pretty good marketing deal—but it's not about that. It's got to be that she's competent, that she's ready."

Last spring, Hammon turned down an offer to become the head coach of the women's basketball team at the University of Florida, after considering it seriously. She was also invited to interview for the Milwaukee Bucks' general-manager position—an unusual occurrence for an assistant coach who has been on the job only three years. Hammon said that, when she asked why she was being considered, she was told that "ownership had asked them to reach out." (The Bucks declined to comment.) More recently, she interviewed to be the head coach of the men's team at Colorado State, before withdrawing her name from contention.

When I asked Hammon why she turned down the University of Florida job, she said that Popovich and the Spurs had more to teach her. "If you're interested in cars, it's like Henry Ford coming and saying, Hey, why don't I teach you about the Model T?"

Her goal is not to save the sport from itself, or to prove that women can thrive in male-dominated professions. She doesn't have time to worry about taking on doubters. "My motives shouldn't be to change people's minds," she said. "My job is to be the best that I can be, and if that changes your mind then great, but I can't be consumed with how you feel about me." ♦



# ONE GOOD BET

*Can a sidelined Wall Street legend find redemption in cryptocurrencies?*

BY GARY SHTEYNGART

Michael Novogratz was in a good mood. It was the thirtieth reunion of Princeton's class of 1987, and the on-again, off-again billionaire was getting a lot of respect. "I want to hit you up about something," a two-star general said. "Those are the freshest kicks," a young bro in a dressing gown observed, complimenting Novogratz's black patent shoes with orange piping and matching tassels. ("It's all about peacocking," Novogratz later told me, of his sartorial extravagance.) He huddled with Joseph Lubin, a former roommate and one of the co-founders of the hit cryptocurrency platform Ethereum. It was a warm June day, last year, and the Princetonians were amiably crushing cans of Bud amid chants of "Tiger, tiger, tiger, sis sis sis, boom boom boom, ah!"

The alumni parade, known as the P-rade, started to wind through the neo-Gothic campus, its mob of participants marching past signs for a symposium entitled "Can America Still Lead?" As we joined the P-rade, we heard shouts of "Novo! Novo! Novo!" He stopped by a gaggle of young wrestlers, all of whom seemed monumentally drunker than the rest of Princeton's population—a notable distinction. Novogratz, formerly the captain of the college's wrestling team, slapped a half-naked man on the back so hard that he left a red palm print. "I five-starred a guy!" he shouted as we continued down the P-rade, men running up to him as if he were the mayor of a small Sicilian hill town. "Mr. Novogratz! I'm Goldman corporate trading!"

Princeton, like Wall Street, where Novogratz has made at least three fortunes and lost at least two, is full of stories about him. There was the story of how Novogratz never showed up for R.O.T.C. (he was admitted to Princeton on an R.O.T.C. scholarship). And the time, at the previous reunion, when

he flew a helicopter—Novogratz did a year's worth of helicopter-pilot training, at the Army's flight school in Alabama—down Prospect Avenue, nearly clipping a gate. "He's bombastic and he's full of shit," one of his friends said, "but he doesn't have a mean bone in his body." Novogratz, who is properly bald, with a pair of sharp blue eyes and a gravelly voice that can go full Muppet after a volley of drinks, was, uncharacteristically, sober. At the behest of his wife, he was preparing himself for an eleven-day Vipassana meditation retreat in Wales. "I'm trying to regrow my discipline muscle," he told me as we approached the Tudor hulk of the Tiger Inn, his eating club, where a beer-pong tournament was already well under way in the basement.

Novogratz had risen quickly, at Goldman Sachs and in the hedge-fund world, but each rise was met with a stunning, often humiliating reversal—first a parting with Goldman, in 2000, over what has been referred to in the press as "lifestyle issues," and then the removal from his partnership, in 2015, at the high-flying Fortress Group after losing a series of currency bets. Once worth north of two billion dollars, Novogratz had been reduced to the ranks of mere centimillionaires. But 2017 was proving to be pivotal for him and a motley band of other sidelined investors seeking redemption—think the Winklevoss twins—as they tethered themselves to the year's most befuddling financial event: the rise of cryptocurrency.

Novogratz had recognized its potential when one of his partners at Fortress, Peter Briger, introduced him to one of its earlier evangelists, an Argentinean investor named Wences Casares. In 2013, Novogratz put seven million dollars of his own money in cryptocurrency investments when bitcoin was selling at around a hundred dollars a coin. (A single coin currently

sells for more than sixty times that amount.) Citing his luck at being in the right place at the right time, Novogratz has called himself "the Forrest Gump of bitcoin."

Novogratz's crypto bets had coaxed him out of self-imposed retirement, and soon sprang him back onto CNBC and Bloomberg. Late last year, as the G.O.P.'s tax bill barreled through Congress, he called Steve Mnuchin, the Treasury Secretary, an "idiot" (spelling out the word, for good measure) and rebuked Trump's economic adviser Gary Cohn for the tax overhaul, saying that he "shouldn't be able to live with himself." Both Mnuchin and Cohn had been partners alongside Novogratz at Goldman Sachs, and this made for an unusual breach of Goldman etiquette.

To cap off the reunion, Novogratz had paid for a concert by Duran Duran. "Every five years, he does us well," a classmate told me. Even in the middle of a streak of sobriety, it was hard for Novogratz to say no to a good party. "We're a family of near-alcoholics," he joked earlier that day, referring to the hungover crowd at a Princeton brunch that included his wife, Sukey Cáceres, also an alum, and their four children, three of whom have attended the university. The night ended with a touch of eighties style and contemporary dissonance. As gracefully aging Princetonians drained the booze from their red plastic cups, Simon Le Bon, dressed in what looked like a swath of green vinyl, belted out "A View to a Kill," and, in one corner, Ted Cruz (class of '92) darkly made his presence known.

In the past decade, a large number of the friends I had come of age with in Manhattan left the city, displaced by rising costs to Berlin or Los Angeles or the mid-Hudson Valley. These friends, many of whom were fellow-alumni of my alma maters,



*Michael Novogratz calls himself “the Forrest Gump of bitcoin,” citing his luck at being in the right place at the right time.*



Stuyvesant High School and Oberlin College, were writers, graphic designers, architects, academics, and journalists—the heart of what used to be the creative middle class. As I walked down the now unfamiliar streets of my city, eying a new breed of closely cropped, athletic individuals, I kept wondering, *Who are these people?* Eventually, I discovered that they worked mostly for banks or hedge funds or private-equity firms. Around 2012, I decided that my next novel would be about finance. When I first broached the idea of making a fund manager the hero to a friend whose husband works in the industry, she asked me, “Why would you do that? Bankers have no imagination.” (In my research, wives saying unflattering things about their spouses became a consistent theme.)

Do bankers have imagination? That statement felt both like a challenge and like a lodestar for my work. I would find hedge funders worth writing about or invent my own. More than a few reminded me of Novogratz’s wrestling friends—scrappy lower-middle-class kids from the peripheries of New York or Naples or Moscow. As a hungry, insecure kid growing up in eastern Queens, I remember watching the movie “Wall Street” and fantasizing about how I would look in suspenders and a contrasting collar. The men on the big

screen did not have to understand themselves; the money made them understood. Although my greed had been expunged at Oberlin, and the financial crisis of 2007–08 had left me with a more or less permanent view of finance as an industry built on fraud, I found it hard to dislike some of my new acquaintances. The more intellectually vibrant ones came with backgrounds in advanced math and physics; they approached their trades like a puzzle, albeit one they were increasingly unable to solve. Others seemed to be flirting with the edges of sociopathy, or, at least, an inability to pass “Blade Runner”’s Voight-Kampff empathy test.

In the popular imagination, “hedge funder” has become shorthand for a special breed of super-rich, super-intelligent scoundrel. Hedge funds raise money from so-called accredited individuals (a minimum of a million dollars in investable assets is required) and institutions such as university endowments or pension and sovereign wealth funds, and then deploy it in any way they see fit. It may help to think of hedge-fund managers as an army of men—and they are mostly men—walking down the street with dustbusters, trying to suck up cash and assets from every nook and cranny in the universe. In theory, at least, hedge funds are supposed to generate returns in bear as

well as bull markets, because the contents of their dustbusters are hedged, by the managers taking long positions on assets that are expected to increase in value and shorting those they expect will decrease.

The rise of this less regulated “buy” side of finance has put to shame the income of the “sell” side. Around Manhattan, “investment banker” now carries the same sad also-ran cachet as “doctor” or “lawyer.” An older managing director at a large bank complained of the struggles of the middle class. When I asked him to define “middle class,” he spoke of people like him, earning between two and four million dollars a year. Young analysts told me they were being priced out of Brooklyn, much less Manhattan, by rising hedge-fund plutocrats and their ilk.

Part of this may be ascribed to a strategy involving two numbers—“the two and twenty.” Traditionally, many hedge-fund managers have collected twenty per cent of a fund’s profits, and they have also kept two per cent of the assets committed to a fund, regardless of the outcome of their bets. Huge losses for clients could still mean a payday for managers. Wall Street has long been a place of outsized compensation for the few who can master its rules, or at least pretend to. (There is a book that handily explains the investor-manager relationship in its title alone: “Where Are the Customers’ Yachts?”) Hedge funds seemed to offer the best and the brightest the quickest road to riches yet. As one hedge-fund manager told me, “There’s money sloshing around and chunks falling off, and people get compensated for standing there.”

These people could be divided into many categories, but the two most useful I’ve found are the rainmakers—the polished, fraternal, athletically built avatars of the Princeton-Colgate-Duke axis—and the Dockers-wearing, kielbasa-munching math whizzes. Some funds seemed to make an art form out of how many brilliant physicists from the former Soviet Union can be squeezed into a small, overlit room. There was no question which of these two groups the socially brilliant but algorithmically challenged Novogratz belonged to.



*“We’ve been getting a lot of calls saying that you’re a terrible magician.”*

What struck me about both sets was their desire to live their lives as a competitive sport. “Money has nothing to do with it,” Turney Duff, a former partner at a health-care hedge fund, told me. “It’s literally about winning.” I began to think of the financial world as a tax on the rest of us, a way to transfer wealth into the hands of a select few through their own considerable cleverness and also through the way their income was taxed versus our own.

And yet the majority of the hedge funders I befriended were not living happier or more interesting lives than my friends who had been exiled from the city. They had devoted their intellects and energies to winning a game that seemed only to diminish the players. One book I was often told to read was “Reminiscences of a Stock Operator,” first published in 1923. Written by Edwin Lefèvre, the novel follows a stockbroker named Lawrence Livingston, widely believed to be based on Jesse Livermore, a colorful speculator who rose from the era of street-corner bucket shops. I was astounded by how little had changed between the days of ticker tape and our own world of derivatives and flash trading, but a facet that none of the book’s Wall Street fans had mentioned was the miserableness of its protagonist. Livingston dreams of fishing off the Florida coast, preferably in his new yacht, but he keeps tacking back up to New York for one more trade. “Trading is addictive,” Novogratz told me at the Princeton reunion. “All these guys get addicted.” Livermore fatally shot himself in New York’s Sherry-Netherland Hotel in 1940.

By 2016, I started drinking more heavily than is usual for me (I was born in Russia). For the second year in a row, there were more shuttered hedge funds than new ones, investors having been turned off by a mixture of high fees and subpar returns, owing in part to a crowded field of funds executing similar strategies and also to an unusual absence of volatility in the markets. Even the legendary traders, like Paul Tudor Jones II, of Tudor Investment, were being walloped. The “two and twenty” model was turning into more of a “1.5 and fifteen” one. The secret-sauce bottles containing trading algorithms and the like had run empty, and to fill the

void my new friends and I turned to Scotch—thirty-year-old Balvenie and twenty-one-year-old Hibiki. After a particularly rough night, my wife found me at 4 A.M., sitting in the corner of our bedroom, trying, and failing, to unbutton my shirt. The stress and the consequent loss of control felt familiar. The fund managers’ ambition was like a drug whose potency I had forgotten. At Stuyvesant High School, a competitive math-and-science school in Manhattan with a high proportion of first-generation immigrants, my classmates and I would get up every morning to wage battle over a hundredth of a percentile on our grade-point average; my new friends were fighting over so many basis points on their Bloomberg monitors. When we failed, we failed in front of our families, our ancestors, our future and our past.

Novogratz ran his first quasi hedge fund when he was barely four years old. The Novogratzes were a military family; in the late nineteen-sixties, they found themselves in Torrance, California. Novogratz and his older brother, Robert, went door-to-door in their neighborhood selling leaves, a useless commodity, to neighbors, five cents for yellow ones, ten for red ones. Robert was shy and hung back, but Michael would run up and ring the doorbell. The neighbors would ask him why the red ones were ten cents, and, according to his mother, Barbara, he would answer, “Look around—there are hardly any red leaves.” He had mastered the concept of supply and demand, not to mention the difference between two asset classes. When I mentioned this incident to Novogratz, he laughed, quickly seeing the parallel between his childhood enterprise and his current bet on cryptocurrency, which, like red leaves, relies on a tricky—some would say, imaginary—valuation. “It could be bitcoins,” he said.

Novogratz is the third of seven children, and his charm and his skills as a storyteller are tied to his membership in this brood of hyper-successful siblings. (Robert is a designer; his older

sister Jacqueline is the founder of Acumen, a global venture firm; the younger siblings include a Wall Street salesman, a sports manager, the co-founder of a sustainable-agriculture investment fund, and a writer.) When I talked to Novogratz’s brothers and sisters, they all brought up the image of seven children growing up in a house with one bathroom, and living chiefly off their father’s modest government salary. There was also some version of “Our mother raised us like we were the Kennedys.”

Nowadays, Barbara Novogratz and Robert, Sr., who retired as a colonel after a long Army career, spend their winters in Virginia, where Novogratz attended high school, and their summers on Long Island, where he bought them a home near an estate he owns in Amagansett. Robert’s father was an immigrant from Austria. Lacking English skills, he settled in Pennsylvania, where he worked at a cement mill. “Dirty work,” Robert told me. Barbara grew up in Queens, in an Irish-German family. Her father died when she was young and her mother worked long hours as an accountant and a singer to make ends meet.

When Novogratz was twenty-five, he was set up on a blind date with Dora Cáceres, who goes by the nickname Sukey. She was in many ways his opposite—a budding intellectual, interested in semiotics, film theory, and the teachings of Ram Dass. Her parents were from Puerto Rico and had moved to the mainland before she was born.

I met Sukey in her office, which is downstairs from the Novogratzes’ palatial apartment, in Tribeca, and decorated with pachyderms in every form and material possible—“The elephant is my power animal,” she said. During our conversation, she told me about a horrific gang rape she suffered before she entered Princeton. The perpetrators walked free. The experience, in part, led to a life of seeking and, later on, of meditation. (Her book on meditation, “Just Sit,” co-written with Novogratz’s younger sister Beth, came out in December.) Conscripting Novogratz into her spiritual journey was one unlikely





outcome of a marriage in which she described her husband as having come from the “privileged white male” baby-boomer generation and “bro culture.”

At the reunion, Novogratz’s friends referred to fearlessness as his best quality. When I asked them if there was anything he did fear, one woman said, “Ask Sukey.” Sukey brought up his parents, making sure to note how much they’ve grown (his father “recently became a vegetarian”). But, in describing Novogratz’s inability to fully connect with her during periods of their marriage, his occasional outbursts of rage over insignificant events (the loss of a jar of foreign currency, for example), and his difficulty in dealing with “the smacks in life,” such as his ouster from Fortress, she said, “Barbara and Bob loved him, but yet they love a winner.”

When I mentioned this to Novogratz, he said, “My mother told everyone I was going to be a senator.” Barbara, when asked, said that she thought he could have been President.

Novogratz started his career at Goldman Sachs as a lowly money-market salesman. It was right around April Fool’s Day, 1989, and he had just spent a year flying helicopters in Alabama. (He continued to serve in the New Jersey National Guard during his first years at Goldman.) The firm moved him to Tokyo, to sell Japanese government bonds to U.S. investors, and, after he expressed his unhappiness over the fact that traders usually made much more than salesmen, Jon Corzine, who was the co-head of the fixed-income division at the time, sent him to Hong Kong, in 1993, where, eventually, he ran the firm’s trading desk. Novogratz’s transition from salesman to trader may be the most salient fact of his career. There is a gulf of difference between the salesman’s ability to schmooze and charm and the trader’s ability to synthesize information about markets and make bets worth hundreds of millions of dollars. “I sometimes think that I was such a good bullshitter as a sales guy that Corzine decided to put me in the job where you couldn’t bullshit,” Novogratz once said, in an interview with Matthias Knab, of Opalesque TV. “The one thing about being a macro trader is that the P. & L. doesn’t lie at the end of the day

and there was a real discipline needed.”

Macro funds look for broad social, political, and macroeconomic trends and, in effect, bet on the way they might affect financial markets. They execute trades using equities, bonds, currencies, commodities, and futures. Macro trading is essentially hubris. It is taking on the mantle of a short-term prophet, the Nostradamus of two months (or weeks or days or hours or minutes) from now, and predicting the shape of the world at that instant.

Some of Novogratz’s fellow hedge funders have questioned his grasp of the finer details of his trading strategies. “He acts like a visionary, but at heart he’s still a salesman,” one manager told me. Others dispute that view. “Mike always gave the most lucid, detailed, and compelling explanations of what was going on,” Peter Rose, who worked with Novogratz in Hong Kong, wrote to me. “He had an uncanny ability to see patterns, causes and effects, the butterfly moving its wings in Tokyo and the tsunami in Singapore and what was the connection, where others only saw chaos.” When the Asian financial crisis hit with full force, in 1997, Novogratz survived what Rose called “a nuclear shitstorm.” Novogratz, who successfully shorted the Thai baht, told me, “When Asia blew up, my team made a fortune.”

He has credited his success to his faith in intuition and has said of un-



successful traders, “They’re bullish but they’re too scared to buy.” Goldman is notorious for its brutal “up or out” culture, but Novogratz thrived in it. He was made partner in 1998. In May, 1999, Goldman went public, entitling Novogratz to shares in the firm, and in December he was named president of Goldman Sachs Latin America, based in São Paulo. He never made it there.

What happened next is one of the most confusing parts of Novogratz’s

career. When I brought it up, he reached for a fidget spinner. The year after Goldman Sachs went public, he left the firm. Widely regarded as one of Wall Street’s hardest-charging party animals, Novogratz cited his separation agreement with Goldman to explain why he could not talk at length about what took place, but summarized the nature of his downfall as the consequence of “partying like a rock star.”

“I felt, like, What the fuck did I do to my life?” he said. “What the fuck did I do to my family?”

Sukey Novogratz described the years the family spent in Asia as “very challenging for marriage.” Back then, her husband, she said, was “someone who was constantly hedging his bets, literally, in work and in life, like, eh, I can never fully commit, even though we were married.”

“It was a humiliating exit,” Novogratz said. “Period.” He went to rehab in Arizona to work on himself and his marriage. “I took it stone-cold serious. I’d never had a therapist in my life and since then I’ve had five.” Around that time, he ran six marathons in the Sahara desert over the course of six days. “That brought me back to life in a lot of ways.”

Scandals have a short half-life on Wall Street. In only a few years, Novogratz engineered his comeback, as a partner at Fortress Investments. With the arrival of Novogratz, along with Peter Briger, who had been a specialist in distressed debt, among other things, at Goldman, the new entity, which had been founded in 1998 as a private-equity company by a former partner at BlackRock and two former managing directors of U.B.S., expanded into the world of real estate, debt securities, and hedge funds. The vision for the firm, Novogratz said, was to be the Goldman Sachs of the “alternative management business.” Novogratz’s hedge fund was to focus on macro trading on a worldwide scale. In an interview during his time at Fortress, Novogratz said, “The assets we trade are big stories, the macroeconomic stories of the world. Global imbalances, business cycles. Will the euro survive? Will the Chinese growth model change?”

For Novogratz, macro trading relies on one’s ability to combine intuition

## SON

It's not the mirror that is draped but  
what remains unspoken between us. Why

say anything about death, how  
the body comes to deploy the myriad worm

as if it were a manageable concept not  
searing exquisite singularity? To serve it up like

a eulogy or a tale of my or your own  
suffering. Some kind of self-abasement.

And so we continue waking to a decapitated sun and trees  
continue to irk me. The heart of charity

bears its own set of genomes. You lug a bacterial swarm  
in the crook of your knee, and through my guts

writhe helminth parasites. Who was ever only themselves?  
At Leptis Magna, when your mother and I were young, we came across

statues of gods with their faces and feet cracked away by vandals. But  
for the row of guardian Medusa heads. No one so brave to deface those.

When she spoke, when your mother spoke, even the leashed  
greyhound stood transfixed. I stood transfixed.

I gave my life to strangers; I kept it from the ones I love.  
Her one arterial child. It is just in you her blood runs.

—*Forrest Gander*

with a mind-boggling number of data points prepared by researchers and analysts. “You see the ballet in the chart,” as he puts it. “We call it luck because we don’t have a word for it,” he told me. “It’s a different type of intelligence. It’s pattern recognition. Most great guys at macro, if you put a jar of jelly beans on the table they can outguess you.”

From 2002 to 2007, Novogratz’s hedge fund reached almost nine billion dollars in assets. In 2007, Fortress went public, creating wealth for its partners but also making them answerable to shareholders. “We were the only company, I think to this day, where five guys became billionaires in a day,” Novogratz said. With a net worth of \$2.3 billion, a new vista of power and connection opened up for a man still in his early forties. *Forbes* put him at No. 407 on its list of the world’s billionaires.

Novogratz was a whiz at raising capital, but Fortress, like much of the financial world, was soon blindsided by the 2008 bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers and the ensuing crisis. “I saw it happening,” Novogratz said. “But I couldn’t move the ship fast enough.” He added, “With hindsight, macro shouldn’t be in a public company.” According to him, Lehman’s collapse alone cost the fund between four and five hundred million dollars. An acquaintance of Novogratz’s described running into him outside the offices of Fortress during that time, eating a hot dog as he braced for a meeting with his co-workers. “He says, ‘I don’t want to go up there. It’s all bad up there.’ The world was melting. He was very emotional.”

Novogratz’s fund eventually recovered. The lessons of the financial debacle were not universally learned on

Wall Street, however. “Beginning in March, 2009, generally, the faster and more enthusiastically you embraced risk assets, the better you did,” Mary Childs, who has covered hedge funds and credit markets for almost a decade and is currently a senior reporter at *Barron’s*, told me. “If we were supposed to learn our lesson about risktaking, we didn’t.”

In 2015, after losing a bet of more than a hundred and fifty million dollars on the Swiss franc, Novogratz and his colleagues made the second of two huge bets that Brazilian interest rates would fall. The first had rested on the assumption that Dilma Rousseff, the President, would lose her reelection bid, that she would be replaced by a leader who would be tougher on inflation, and that interest rates would fall as a result. In 2014, Novogratz predicted that this sequence of events would lead to “a major rally in Brazilian assets,” and, consequently, a windfall for Fortress. Instead, Rousseff won the election. The second bet relied on the belief that rates would fall as a result of the central bank’s actions. They didn’t. Rousseff was eventually impeached, and interest rates did fall after the new President took over, but, according to Novogratz, “it was too late for me.”

Fortress’s macro fund shut down in 2015 and Novogratz left the company. Investors lost between seven and fifteen per cent of their assets, depending on their share class. After he and Goldman parted ways, in 2000, Novogratz had described himself to the acquaintance who later ran into him eating the hot dog as a “discredited rich guy.” Now he was twice discredited, but the “rich” part certainly stuck, even after the Fortress fiasco. Novogratz’s shares were bought back by Fortress for approximately two hundred and fifty million dollars. (“In what other business can you blow yourself up, and still raise five hundred million for the next fund?” the ex-hedge funder, and now writer, Turney Duff once asked me.)

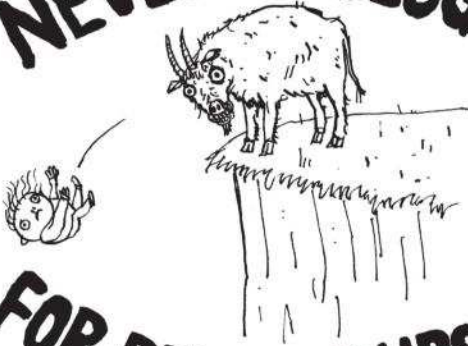
The loss of his partnership hurt on a personal as well as a financial level. If there was a single larger-than-life personality who inspired Novogratz as a child, it was his uncle Ed, a tax collector and a lover of jazz. “My dad was a quiet, tough guy,” he told me, “But his brother had the personality. He loved



# INSPIRATIONAL QUOTES

IDEAL FOR HOME OR OFFICE  
YOURS TO CUT OUT AND KEEP!

NEVER APOLOGIZE

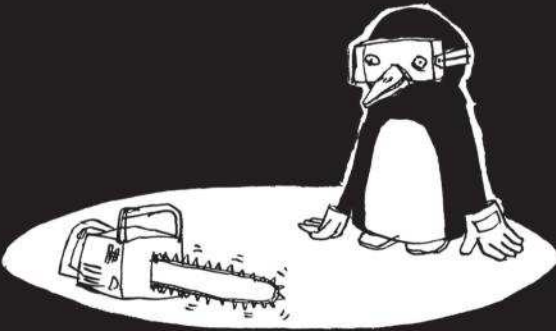


FOR BEING YOURSELF

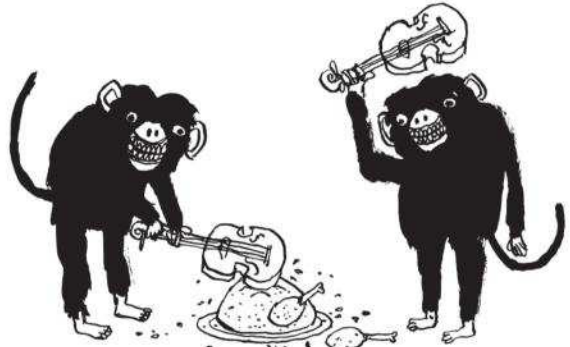
DON'T  
TAKE  
NO  
FOR AN  
ANSWER



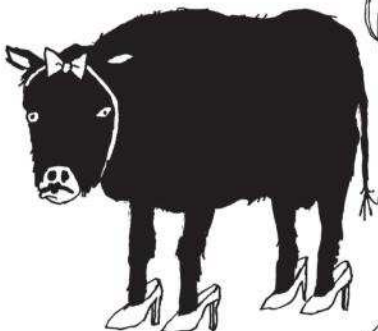
FOLLOW YOUR  
DREAMS



THERE'S NO SUCH  
WORD AS "CAN'T"



BELIEVE IN  
YOURSELF



YOU ARE  
THE BEST  
YOU  
THERE  
EVER WAS



Wall Street gambling. The last words my uncle ever said to me: 'Michael, what the hell is going on? I just got the new *Forbes* and you're falling like a stone.' He died thirty minutes later."

According to Novogratz, cryptocurrencies were a direct result of the 2008 crisis, when people lost faith in banks and bankers. He talks about this with the ardor of a true believer. "I call it the decentralized revolution," he said. "We don't trust institutions, we don't trust authority." Bitcoin was launched in 2009 as a peer-to-peer-based currency, which allowed users to carry out payment transactions without an intermediary, like a bank or a credit-card company, while maintaining anonymity. The identity of Bitcoin's founder, Satoshi Nakamoto—and whether the name represents an individual or a group of people—remains unknown.

After the collapse of his Fortress fund, Novogratz found himself on the coast of the Bay of Bengal in India, talking to his guru, Krishnaji, at the One World Academy, trying to figure out what to do with his life. (Tony Robbins connected the two men in 2007, and the meditation academy has many adherents from the worlds of finance and entertainment.) "What's your vision now?" Krishnaji asked him. "What's your purpose now?" According to Krishnaji, Novogratz's answers vacillated between trying out a political career and giving finance another go. Back in Manhattan, the vision, aided by bitcoin, turned out to be finance again.

During the first dot-com bubble, the technology behind the boom and its subsequent bust was at least understood: you went on Pets.com and bought your dog a leash, which would then be delivered to you. Cryptocurrencies cannot be held or understood in any physical way; they have no central location, and this gives them, and their acolytes—Reddit libertarians, for example—an air of a religious experience. Novogratz told me, of a panel on crypto at which he spoke, "I got off the stage, some girl came up to me, she started, like, quaking, just wanted to tell me it was, like, life-changing for her. That the whole speech was. And then the Chinese wanted selfies, and then the Orthodox Jews wanted

selfies. I must have done twenty selfies."

Fiat currencies such as the dollar are backed by both central governments and their users, but cryptocurrencies are almost always backed by nothing more than their users. From bitcoin's inception, production of the currency was limited by Satoshi Nakamoto to a maximum of twenty-one million coins, insuring eventual scarcity. A few holders of bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies have earned (or "mined," as the terminology goes) their coins by providing the computing power that enables and verifies transactions in the network. Other holders have purchased them. Currency exchanges such as Coinbase, headquartered in San Francisco, allow anyone to buy a coin or a fraction of a coin for either fiat or cryptocurrencies, thus opening up the market to new users. The opaque universe in which the coins move, in conjunction with widespread uncertainty regarding future regulation—and the future of the crypto market itself—have created speculation and almost unheard of amounts of volatility. Some cryptocurrency pump-and-dump and pyramid schemes have resulted in Bernie Madoff-like levels of fraud. Wide-scale legitimate uses for the currency have proved elusive, and many now see bitcoin as a store of value rather than something with which you can buy a cheesesteak or pay for a manicure. There is also an environmental cost, a byproduct of the amount of computing power it can take to mine cryptocurrencies.

But that hasn't stopped the crypto boom. Initial coin offerings, a form of crowdfunding, carry on apace. Companies on the verge of irrelevance, such as Kodak, are planning to mint their own currency (KodakCoin), as is the government of Venezuela (the petro).

The underlying technology is the blockchain system—a decentralized, algorithm-generated, regularly updated database distributed across a network of computers. What can you do with blockchain beyond buying drugs on the dark Web? Potentially, quite a lot. A ledger kept among a vast number of computers can transfer money more securely than traditional banks, and, possibly, faster, all the while denying Wells Fargo, say, a cut of the transaction. But that is only the start. Eth-

ereum's platform, for example, can work as a lawyer-free contract database dealing with everything from property sales to estate transfers.

Novogratz has certainly been making the most of the speculative bubble to rebuild his fortune, but he claims to be invested in the utopian aspects of blockchain as well. He doesn't think that cryptocurrencies will replace the dollar or the yen, but he believes that they will be a boon to countries in the developing world, where people don't have trust in their fiat currencies, and that blockchain can revolutionize the way information is logged and shared and, in our age of data breaches, protected. "I'm good at selling the dream," he said. "I can get onstage and get people to start saying 'Hallelujah! Hallelujah!'"

Novogratz's enthusiasm is genuine and contagious. Then again, Twitter and Facebook were supposed to usher in a new era of democracy and transparency.

When I next saw Novogratz, in July of 2017, about a month after the Princeton reunion, he had recently returned from his Vipassana retreat. "This is not my normal vacation," he told me, over a lunch at the Mercer Kitchen, in SoHo, a few blocks from his office, on Grand Street. "They put you into noble silence. You can't lie, because you can't talk. No thumbs-upping, no sign language. No sexual activity, including masturbation. It's all self-monitoring."

By the time he left the retreat, the lack of self-love and of communication with others seemed to have paid off on a grand karmic scale. Most of Novogratz's profits had stemmed from his initial seven-million-dollar investment in 2013. "The 'genius,' if there was any, was riding the bet and switching," Novogratz told me on another occasion, explaining that in early 2016 he had also bought Ethereum currency at around a dollar a coin, called an ether. Now he was toggling back and forth among various currencies, trying to minimize his risk as his fortune increased dramatically.

The price of ether had spiked during his meditation. "I got out," he said, "and things had gone from two-fifty to three-fifty. I was, like, O.K., I just made a zillion dollars meditating. I should probably make two hundred million



on this whole thing.” He cashed out some of his cryptocurrency to buy a G550 jet, a seaplane, and a Georg Baselitz sculpture. “For the first time, I kind of spoiled myself.”

The intense meditation and the hours of silence and physical restraint had led to a volley of daydreams. “But all of it had the hero-warrior archetype,” Novogratz said. “The archetype I grew up with. And it got to be cartoony at times. Jesus fucking Christ, dude, I saved the plane. Or saved the woman from being harmed. Or, you know, re-created the way Robin Hood”—a philanthropy co-founded by Paul Tudor Jones—“should raise money. Or ran for office. Or made more money on Ethereum so I can donate more. I was, like, Man, how big is your fucking ego? I got probably four years of daydreams or thought process in eleven days.”

A few weeks after our lunch, in the height of the summer, we were standing on a makeshift dock in the Bronx watching black men in shackles and orange jumpsuits board the Vernon C. Bain Center, a barge brought up from New Orleans to serve as a jail and a New York City Department of Corrections intake-and-processing center for the borough. “The boat is symbolic,” Novogratz said. “It’s a slave ship.” Cheap black shoes nicknamed Patakis, for the former New York governor, who was in office when they were first distributed, were strewn around. Released detainees get rid of them as a sign of their new freedom. An employee of the Bail Project, a young Yale graduate, was posting bail for two detainees on the boat. Novogratz is the chairman of the Bail Project’s board and its principal contributor. His daughter Anna encouraged his interest in the fund after working for the Bronx Defenders, a nonprofit legal-services group. The project’s mission is simple: to provide bail for detainees, who often cannot afford even small amounts and get trapped in the system.

On the boat, a clerk told a middle-aged Latina that she needed twenty-five thousand dollars instead of twenty-

five hundred in order to bail out her son. Apparently, there had been a computer error. “They keep sending me back and forth,” the woman said. Her son suffered from multiple sclerosis. “He can’t pick up his hand, his face twitches. His muscles don’t work with this weather.” Her case was not being handled by the Bail Project, and it appeared that her disabled son would remain on the jail boat.



“The Bail Project is a radical move in its own right,” Novogratz said. “It’s a huge fuck-you to the system. We know the first three to five days in jail are the most damaging.” He listed sexual assault, job loss, suicide, and lost places in homeless shelters as potential outcomes.

Anthony Romero, the head of the American Civil Liberties Union, which has received substantial funding from Novogratz, told me, “A lot of hedge-fund-investor types are mostly thinking about throughputs and R.O.I.”—return on investment. “He has a better appreciation of the nuance of trying to tackle social issues.”

Novogratz thinks about philanthropy more than any other financier I met during the course of my research. As a result, spending time with him means witnessing the near sum total of New York’s fund-raisers. Some of them take place in the Novogratzes’ vast Tribeca apartment (joining Robert De Niro’s former duplex and Harvey Keitel’s former one-story pad). Here one could see the singer Cassandra Wilson at a fund-raiser for the Jazz Foundation of America, as the Puerto Rican musician Joe Quijano shyly watched the festivities from his wheelchair. On another night, a dinner in a hotel ballroom was accompanied by a video procession of parents explaining how they were bankrupted by their children’s cancer diagnoses. On another day, Novogratz hovered over Times Square on a digital billboard as he introduced a wrestling tournament between Japan and the United States to benefit his charity Beat the Streets, which uses wrestling to help at-risk kids.

It is hard not to think that in a fundamentally humane society none of

this glittering largesse would even be necessary—that inner-city kids would get proper schooling, elderly jazz musicians would have hot meals and shelter, young people in the Bronx who have committed minor nuisance crimes would not be locked up on repurposed jail barges, the parents of children stricken with near death sentences would not be forced to declare bankruptcy. Novogratz, who considers himself “halfway between center-left and progressive,” would probably agree. During my lunch with him at the Mercer Kitchen, he told me, “I’ve always said I’d run for office if I had a five-year period in my life where really I felt, like, Hey, my behavior is laudable.” He laughed. “That I haven’t done stuff that would embarrass myself, or my kids, or my family, or my parents. Maybe I’ve got two months’ traction on that in the past.”

By the fall, Novogratz was a billionaire once more. The price of a single bitcoin had been close to three thousand dollars during the summer; now it was clawing at five thousand. I visited him one Wednesday in October, at his office, walking in past a large statue of Evel Knievel in the lobby—the base reads “Bones heal, pain is temporary and chicks dig scars.” Plush sofas were occupied by representatives of the Brown University endowment, a member of the board of Tesla, and the heads of a major publicity firm, among others.

Two weeks earlier, Novogratz had announced his decision to rejoin the hedge-fund world and launch a cryptocurrency fund with a hundred and fifty million dollars of the money he had personally made on crypto and three hundred and fifty million from outside investors. (Boaz Weinstein, who is the founder of the hedge fund Saba Capital Management and also a former classmate of mine at Stuyvesant, told me, “I like his tactic: ‘It’s a bubble! Ride the rocket, baby!’”) Novogratz gathered some members of his staff to discuss the emerging fund. Most were dressed casually, in sweatshirts and jeans. Novogratz typically wears T-shirts that read “Coach” or “Clam Bar” and his favorite speed-racer pants, and today he was dressed in similar regalia. “I want to raise money as fast

as we can,” he said. “I have a foreboding feeling markets are going to be a lot higher in six months.”

He continued, “When you meet with people, you’re doing the same dog-and-pony show—it’s boring. I want to bring someone who has a different skill set than me, someone who’s younger and smarter. At Pantera—an established fund—they rolled out a teenager. He was giving out odds on bitcoin code being cracked.” Novogratz smiled. “I’m feeling like a California V.C.!” he said.

“How much have we spent on alcohol?” a woman asked. “Three thousand seven hundred?” Novogratz threw a raucous crypto party every Wednesday night, describing it as the cantina scene in the original “Star Wars.” In George Lucas’s universe, Novogratz would presumably play the role of resident Yoda by dint of age and stature. In an effort to maintain standards, a motion to ban bankers in suits was passed (often, it is hard to figure out whether Novogratz’s bro culture is co-opting the crypto-geeks or it’s the other way around) before the staffers dispersed.

After that discussion concluded, the meetings started. Novogratz has a desk in his office, but I’ve rarely seen him behind it. He prefers his couch, sometimes adjudicating disputes from it like a don, sometimes sprawled across it with his reading glasses on, a sliver of belly visible beneath a T-shirt. Among Novogratz’s favorite phrases are “It’s above my pay grade” and “I’m going to grab one of my geeks.”

“I’m a decent leader, but I’m not a manager,” he later told me. “A leader has to be inspirational. A manager has to stay in the lane.”

Two well-tanned publicists, a woman and a man, came in with an idea for a gender-specific coin. “A lot of women don’t understand finance,” the woman said, pitching a concept she was calling Y-Coin.

After they left, I asked Novogratz what he thought. He shook his head.

A thick-bearded producer in a black hat and a tuxedo jacket came in to discuss a film that Novogratz was producing. He has been in the film business since leaving Fortress, and recently funded the under-the-radar, oddly mesmerizing “My Friend Dahmer,” a film

about the early years of the serial killer. He was now staking some of his crypto wealth on a more commercial project, called “Assassination Nation,” a thriller written and directed by Sam Levinson.

“If we don’t get into Sundance—the producer started to say.

“We’re fucked,” Novogratz finished. (The film did get into Sundance.)

A fresh-faced young man with Fordham and Citibank on his résumé came in. “Did you play sports?” Novogratz asked right away.

“Ice hockey.”

“What’s the worst morally shitty investment you ever did?”

“Payday-lending stuff.”

“We’re rich enough not to have to do shitty things.”

“I knew I was going to get shit for wearing a suit,” the young man said, to Novogratz’s laughter.

“I’m fifty-two,” Novogratz told him. “I can probably still beat you in a wrestling match. My knees are the only problem.”

At 6 P.M., the cantina was in full swing in a large back office, with idealistic young people presenting me with an endless array of uses for the new technology, including some kind of

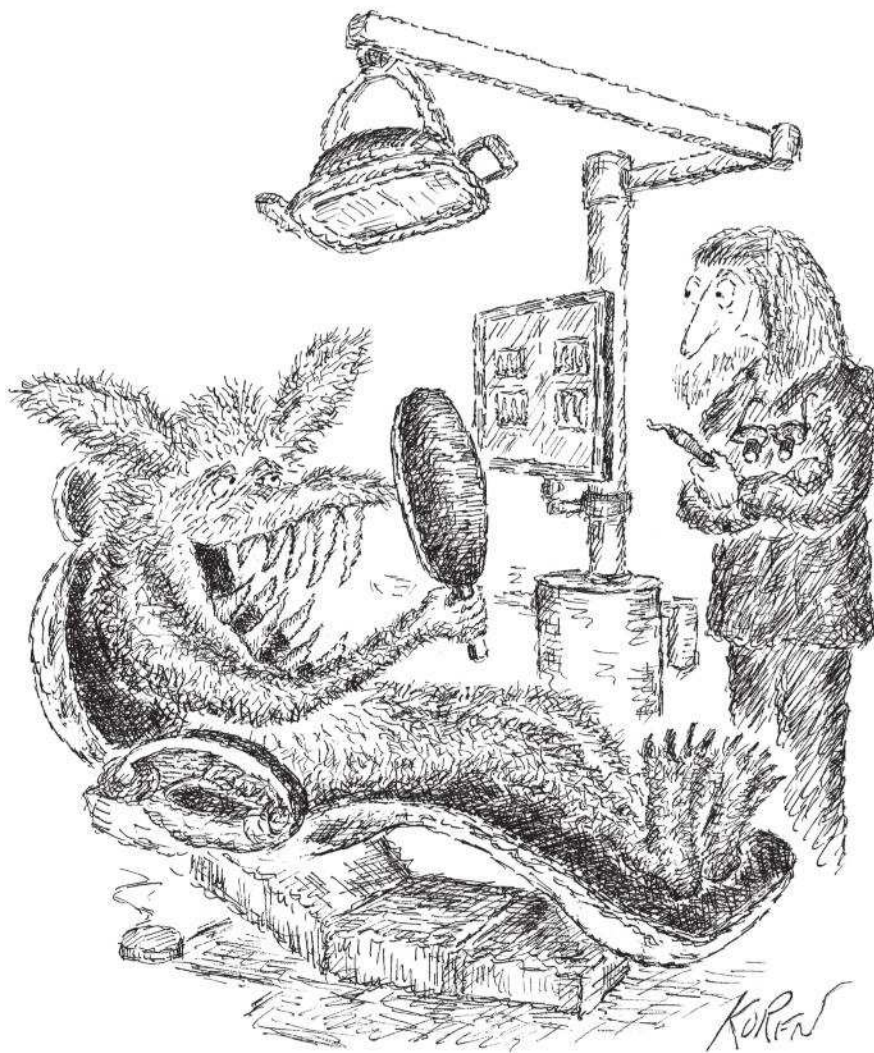
medical or pharmaceutical blockchain scheme and a “smart fabric” company that is launching its own token. “My white paper is in your possession!” a man with a Slavic accent yelled at Novogratz. “If my guy says yes, I’ll do it,” Novogratz yelled back.

After we left the party, Novogratz told me, “My role is spokesperson and adult. They’re all young and they could use some guidance.” His message to the youth making millions in the (currently) underregulated crypto space: “Pay your taxes!”

Cryptocurrency has been compared to the seventeenth-century Dutch tulip mania, when tulip bulbs sold at outrageous prices, completely divorced from their intrinsic value, until the market inevitably collapsed. Crypto’s “tulip camp” includes a variety of investors and thinkers, among them Warren Buffett and JPMorgan Chase’s C.E.O., Jamie Dimon. One of Wall Street’s so-called “permabears,” the economist Nouriel Roubini, has predicted that bitcoin eventually will crash to zero. “There is no there there,” Aswath Damodaran, a noted expert on valuation at N.Y.U.’s Stern School of Business,







*"Thanks, Doc—you've put me back in business."*

told me. "I don't think that there has been so much ink spilled, so much talk generated, and so much analysis done of so little in the history of markets as I have seen in the last two years on cryptocurrencies."

After bitcoin and other currencies soared over the summer and fall, Novogratz presented this stage of crypto as a "speculative mania phase" that would crash like the dot-com bust but then reëmerge with more mature players. Out with AltaVista, in with Google. In Novogratz's estimation, individual cryptocurrencies would fail—although he is bullish on bitcoin and ether retaining their value in the long term. "I don't know if the speculative phase ends in March, ends in a year from now, eighteen months from now,"

Novogratz told me, "but it will end." He suggested that it will end when "too many people have bought in." (At a dinner during the fall of 2017, one of my favorite Oberlin professors, a Marxist, told me that he had just bought some ether.)

I asked Jed McCaleb, a founder of the popular cryptocurrencies ripple and stellar, whether the financial industry has been too late to the party. "Not too late—too early," he said. "It's still pretty early, technically. There's a hype preceding the reality similar to what you saw in the dot-com bubble. There are lots of good ideas but lots of nonsense that doesn't warrant the kind of money that's been dumped in it. A lot of investors don't know which is which." I asked him if he thought Novogratz

knew. "It's easy to look smart in a bull market," McCaleb told me, "which is not to say he's not a smart guy."

A friend who works in finance once told me, "Nobody survives a billion." From my own research, I've found that immense wealth often leads to regrettable personal and business decisions. Novogratz's billionaire survival tactic seems to be a blend of excessive personal spending, over-the-top philanthropy, and meditation.

In November of 2017, I went to Tamil Nadu, India, to meet Novogratz's spiritual guru, Krishnaji, at his meditation academy. Krishnaji, a handsome man smelling of good soap, has imparted to Novogratz his philosophy of acknowledging and dissolving the "suffering state" and living his life from what he called "the beautiful state." (I kept thinking of his philosophy as "the two-state solution.") Krishnaji and Novogratz travelled across India in January of 2015, looking for distressed properties owned by India's Central Bank in which to invest. During the trip, Novogratz told me, all he wanted was to meditate with Krishnaji, while all his business-minded guru wanted to do was work on their private-equity deals. "In the next seven years we'll package the property, developing it, making it plots and lots, depending on where the land is situated," Krishnaji explained when I met him in November.

The Web site for Krishnaji's real-estate ventures, White Lotus Structures, declares that "a palpable touch of the sacred is experienced in all its creations." ("He's a piece of work," Sukey Novogratz told me, when I brought up his business dealings. Krishnaji, for his part, told me that he pumps a lot of money back into the academy.)

As I walked down the frangipani-strewn "Silent Path" that connected my villa with the beach on the Bay of Bengal, one of the academy's gurus told me that Krishnaji "does various businesses from a beautiful state of being. That is the reason for his success."

Yet Krishnaji was straightforward when it came to Novogratz's departure from Fortress: "He saw that throughout his life he's had this image of himself as a great financial genius, and that, in that particular incident, he had made

such a huge blunder that his image was shaken. He was not a financial genius at that moment—it was a stupid decision he had made. He saw that his suffering was not so much the loss of money, because he could again make it back. His suffering was actually the death of an identity.”

Novogratz’s cryptocurrency hedge fund never launched. In December, after the price of a single bitcoin rocketed to more than nineteen thousand dollars, Novogratz told me that “it would be a different proposition raising a crypto hedge fund today than it was three months ago.” He said he was not comfortable running other people’s money when the currency was at its peak, and predicted that bitcoin would consolidate at between eight and sixteen thousand dollars. “I’d rather look stupid than be stupid,” he added. Right after he told me of his plans to shelve his hedge fund, bitcoin experienced one of its habitual micro-crashes, falling to under fourteen thousand dollars a coin.

Some people thought that Novogratz had simply not raised enough capital to launch the fund. Others focussed on the fact that, despite his penchant for showmanship, he was not making a good case for his fund. “To build a fund, you need a lot of focus and attention to detail and have ambition to be institutional,” the manager who’d proclaimed Novogratz a mere salesman told me. “A great trade is not a fund.”

Before he bailed, Novogratz had described another idea to me, one several magnitudes more audacious—certainly more institutional, and potentially more durable—than a mere half-a-billion-dollar hedge fund. He wanted to launch a publicly traded merchant bank solely for cryptocurrencies, which, with characteristic immodesty, he described as “the Goldman Sachs of crypto,” and was calling Galaxy Digital. “I’m either going to look like a genius or an idiot,” he said.

Novogratz announced the bank’s launch in early January, the same week that Dimon, of JPMorgan Chase, who is one of the most vocal critics of cryptocurrency, publicly regretted calling bitcoin a fraud (“The blockchain is real,” he told Fox Business). Shortly afterward, I sat down with Novogratz

in his Tribeca apartment’s far-flung kitchen to discuss Galaxy Digital.

“Goldman Sachs can make money if the stock market goes up and if the stock market goes down,” Novogratz said. “That’s what we’re trying to build. Right now, we’re still going to be way correlated to the way the market goes for at least the first year or two,” he conceded. “But we’re trying to build enough diversity into the business that we can withstand hurricanes.” He told me that Galaxy Digital would combine his considerable crypto holdings with an asset-management operation, a trading business, a venture that would invest in new initial coin offerings, and an advisory arm that would counsel companies.

The new entity’s launch was not so much an I.P.O. as a complex R.T.O., or reverse takeover, involving a Canadian shell company called Bradmer Pharmaceuticals. Galaxy Digital would still be based in New York, but because Canada offered easier and faster access to the public market Novogratz had decided to launch on the Canadian TSX venture exchange, with plans to eventually transfer to Canada’s main exchange. He would contribute around three hundred and fifty million dollars, while raising another two hundred and fifty million dollars.

“It’s a brilliant move,” Josh Brown, the C.E.O. of Ritholtz Wealth Management, in New York, said. “It’s always better to own the casino than to play.” The hedge-fund manager Jeff Gramm told me, “If you really believe in crypto, this is an opportunity to dominate a growing niche that Goldman Sachs and the other big banks might be too risk-averse to bother with. Even if ninety per cent of these cryptos are total bullshit, you could build a really nice business. Think about Michael Milken and Drexel Burnham in the late seventies and early eighties. None of the big investment banks wanted to touch high-yield trading, and Drexel ultimately became the most profitable bank on Wall Street.” (Milken, known at the time as the “junk-bond king,” was also sentenced to ten years in prison for securities fraud. He was released after two years. Novogratz has publicly appealed to cryptocurrency tycoons to play by the rules and avoid Milken-like fates.)

Jed McCaleb, of ripple and stellar, predicted that in the next couple of years a lot of crypto companies with big balance sheets will acquire one another. “A merchant bank can facilitate that,” he told me. “It’s a timely thing to do.”

Of course, not everyone is on board with the idea of a finance billionaire Goldmanizing the new space. A self-described “crypto lawyer” wrote on Twitter, “Hey I know—let’s use crypto to recreate precisely the fucked up institutional structures that crypto was created to surpass.”

Recently, Novogratz showed up at a staid dinner for retired Goldman Sachs partners wearing his speed-racer pants. He had attended these dinners before, but not from his current position of success in crypto. The prodigal son had returned. The investment bank—encapsulating the highs and lows of his career—finds its way into many of his conversations. “We hired Goldman’s best guy in blockchain,” Novogratz told me on several occasions.

Government regulation remains the greatest challenge to the future of cryptocurrency. “It’s stressful, because the regulatory environment’s not clear,” Novogratz said. “You don’t even know what the rules are. In every country. Even in the U.S.”

On the day we met at his apartment, a regulatory crackdown in China, preceded by one announced in South Korea, was pushing the price of bitcoin down. (It hasn’t returned to its December high, and is currently priced at around seven thousand dollars.) Meanwhile, it appeared that hedge funds, many of which had ended 2016 either ailing or dead, were reporting their best returns in years. After six years of exploring finance, I concluded that, despite the expertise and the intelligence on display, nobody really knows anything. “In two years, this will be a big business,” Novogratz said, of Galaxy Digital. “Or it won’t be.”

His attitude seems to come from a battle-hardened place. “You know, when you’ve screwed up as much as me in life, you’re not so worried about it,” he said, over a glass of fine Burgundy, his voice echoing across his palatial kitchen. “I’ve tried my best. I think I’m right on this thing.” ♦



## MADE IN ITALY

*The Chinese immigrants who assemble designer bags in Tuscany.*

BY D. T. MAX

The first significant wave of Chinese immigrants arrived in the industrial zone around Prato, a city fifteen miles northwest of Florence, in the nineteen-nineties. Nearly all of them came from Wenzhou, a port city south of Shanghai. For the Chinese, the culture shock was more modest than one might have expected. “The Italians were friendly,” one early arrival remembered. “Like the Chinese, they called one another Uncle. They liked family.” In Tuscany, business life revolved around small, interconnected firms, just as it did in Wenzhou, a city so resolutely entrepreneurial that it had resisted Mao’s collectivization campaign. The Prato area was a hub for mills and workshops, some of which made clothes and leather goods for the great fashion houses. If you were willing to be paid off the books, and by the piece, Prato offered plenty of opportunities. Many Wenzhouans found jobs there. “The Italians, being canny, would subcontract out their work to the Chinese,” Don Giovanni Momigli, a priest whose parish, near Prato, included an early influx of Chinese, told me. “Then they were surprised when the Chinese began to do the work on their own.”

By the mid-nineties, Wenzhouans were setting up textile businesses in small garages, where they often also lived. Soon, they began renting empty workshops, paying with cash. The authorities didn’t ask too many questions. Prato’s business model was falling apart under the pressures of globalization. As it became harder for Italians to make a living in manufacturing, some of them welcomed the money that the Chinese workers brought into the local economy. If you could no longer be an artisan, you could still be a landlord.

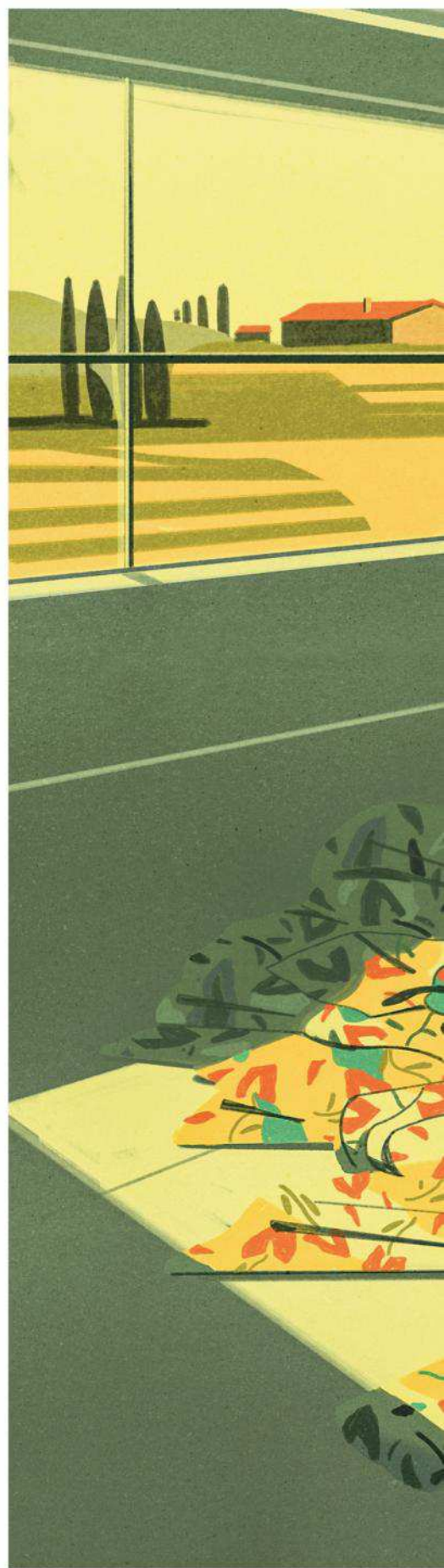
Throughout the aughts, Chinese continued to show up in Tuscany. A non-stop flight was established between Wenzhou and Rome. Some migrants came

with tourist visas and stayed on. Others paid smugglers huge fees, which they then had to work off, a form of indentured servitude that was enforced by the threat of violence. The long hours that the Chinese worked astonished many Italians, who were used to several weeks of paid vacation a year and five months of maternity leave. In 1989, the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, using racist language still common among some Italians, published an article about a Chinese worker under the headline “YELLOW STAKHANOVITE ON THE ARNO.”

While Florence was celebrated for its premium leatherwork, Prato was best known for the production of textiles. The Wenzhou workers tacked in a third direction. They imported cheap cloth from China and turned it into what is now called *pronto moda*, or “fast fashion”: polyester shirts, plasticky pants, insignia jackets. These items sold briskly to low-end retailers and in open-air markets throughout the world.

The Chinese firms gradually expanded their niche, making clothes for middle-tier brands, like Guess and American Eagle Outfitters. And in the past decade they have become manufacturers for Gucci, Prada, and other luxury-fashion houses, which use often inexpensive Chinese-immigrant labor to create accessories and expensive handbags that bear the coveted “Made in Italy” label. Many of them are then sold to prosperous consumers in Shanghai and Beijing. It’s not just Italian brands that have profited from this cross-cultural arrangement: a Chinese leather-goods entrepreneur I recently met with just outside Prato was wearing a forty-thousand-dollar Bulgari watch.

More than ten per cent of Prato’s two hundred thousand legal residents are Chinese. According to Francesco Nannucci, the head of the police’s investigative unit in Prato, the



*The Chinese residents of Prato have arguably*





*revived the fading manufacturing city, which has the highest proportion of immigrants in Italy.*

ILLUSTRATION BY EMILIANO PONZI



city is also home to some ten thousand Chinese people who are there illegally. Prato is believed to have the second-largest Chinese population of any European city, after Paris, and it has the highest proportion of immigrants in Italy, including a large North African population.

Many locals who worked in the textile and leather industries resented the Chinese immigrants, complaining that they cared only about costs and speed, not about aesthetics, and would have had no idea how to make fine clothes and accessories if not for the local craftsmen who taught them. Simona Innocenti, a leather artisan, told me that her husband was forced out of bag-making by cheaper Chinese competitors. She said of the newcomers, "They copy, they imitate. They don't do anything original. They're like monkeys."

Although it could be argued that the Chinese have revived Prato's manufacturing industry, there has been a backlash against them. Native residents have accused Chinese immigrants of bringing crime, gang warfare, and garbage to the city. Chinese

mill owners, they complain, ignore health laws and evade taxes; they use the schools and the hospitals without contributing money for them. In the early nineties, a group of Italians who worked in areas with a high concentration of immigrants sent an open letter to the Chinese government, sarcastically demanding citizenship: "We are six hundred honest workers who feel as if we were already citizens of your great country."

The strangest accusation was that the Chinese in Tuscany weren't dying—or, at least, that they weren't leaving any bodies behind. In 1991, the regional government began an investigation into why, during the previous twelve months, not a single Chinese death had been officially recorded in Prato or in two nearby towns. In 2005, the government was still mystified—that year, more than a thousand Chinese arrivals were registered, and only three deaths. Locals suspected that Chinese mobsters were disposing of corpses in exchange for passports, which they then sold to new arrivals, a scheme that took advantage of the native population's ap-

parent inability to tell any one Chinese person from another.

There was a note of jealousy to the Pratans' complaints, as well as a reluctant respect for people who had beaten them at their own game. Elizabeth Krause, a cultural anthropologist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, has written about the changes in Prato. She told me, "While I was there, people would say to me, '*Eraavamo noi i cinesi*'"—"We were the Chinese."

Even as many Italians maintained a suspicion of Chinese immigrants, they still criticized them for not contributing fully to the wider economy. Innocenti, the leather artisan, claimed that "the Chinese don't even go to the store here. They have a van that goes from factory to factory, selling Band-Aids, tampons, and chicken. And in the back of the van they have a steamer with rice." The under-the-table cash economy of Prato's Chinese factories has facilitated tax evasion. Last year, as the result of an investigation by the Italian finance ministry into five billion dollars' worth of questionable money transfers, the Bank of China, whose Milan branch had reportedly been used for half of them, paid a settlement of more than twenty million dollars. Many of the transfers, the authorities said, represented undeclared income from Chinese-run businesses, or money generated by the counterfeiting of Italian fashion goods.

In Italy, these sorts of investigations are often more show than substance, and many Chinese residents see themselves as convenient targets. "We didn't invent this way of doing business," one mill owner pointed out to me. "If you go south from Rome, you'll find people who are a *lot* worse than the Chinese." He speculated that some Italians disliked the Chinese for working harder than they did, and for succeeding. In the Prato area, some six thousand businesses are registered to Chinese citizens. Francesco Xia, a real-estate agent who heads a social organization for young Chinese-Italians, said, "The Chinese feel like the Jews of the thirties. Prato is a city that had a big economic crisis, and now there's a nouveau-riche class of Chinese driving fancy cars, spending money in restaurants, and dressing in



*"I hate to spoil your porridge, but your son has a blonde in his room."*

the latest fashions. It's a very dangerous situation."

At a time when Europe is filled with anti-immigrant rhetoric, political extremists have pointed to the demographic shifts in Prato as proof that Italy is under siege. In February, Patrizio La Pietra, a right-wing senator, told a Prato newspaper that the city needed to confront "Chinese economic illegality," and that the underground economy had "brought the district to its knees, eliminated thousands of jobs, and exposed countless families to hunger." Such assertions have been effective: in Italy's recent national elections, Tuscany, which since the end of the Second World War had consistently supported leftist parties, gave twice as many votes to right-wing and populist parties as it did to those on the left. Giovanni Donzelli, a member of the quasi-Fascist Fratelli d'Italia party, who last month was elected a national representative, told me, "The Chinese have their own restaurants and their own banks—even their own police force. You damage the economy twice. Once, because you compete unfairly with the other businesses in the area, and the second time because the money doesn't go back into the Tuscan economic fabric." He added that he had once tried to talk with some Chinese parents at his children's school. "They had been here six or seven years, and they still didn't speak Italian," he scoffed. "Because they didn't need to!"

Prato's *centro storico* is a picturesque maze of streets paved with flagstones and bordered by walls that date to the early Renaissance. One Sunday in February, when I visited, many locals were doing what Italians call *le vasche* ("laps"), walking from one end of the district to the other, occasionally pausing to look in shopwindows. Some were on their way to family lunches, carrying plates of biscotti wrapped in shiny paper stamped with the names of the city's best bakeries. The Duomo has superb frescoes by Fra Filippo Lippi—"The most excellent of all his works," according to Vasari—and a gold-and-glass reliquary that holds what is claimed to be the sacred girdle of Mary. In

a sense, it is Prato's original textile.

Just outside the city walls, in Prato's Chinatown, well-to-do Chinese families were carrying their own wrapped parcels of sweets: mashed-taro buns, red-bean cakes. Suburbanites, coming into town to see relatives, drove BMWs, Audis, and Mercedeses. (In a telling remark, more than one Italian insisted to me that no Chinese person would be caught in a Fiat Panda, one of the Italian company's most modest cars.) According to a 2015 study by a regional economic agency, Chinese residents contribute more than seven hundred million euros to Prato's provincial economy, about eleven per cent of its total.

Chinatown, though, looked dishevelled. In the alleyways, I saw that many of the windows were covered with blankets. A few days later, I accompanied authorities on several raids and learned that there were sweatshops behind some of those windows. In rooms without heat, the newest and poorest arrivals, many of them undocumented, sat bent over sewing machines, tacking collars onto shirts or affixing brightly colored stripes to jogging pants. Such pants might sell to retailers for about eight euros—a fifth of what they would cost if they were made legally by Italians.

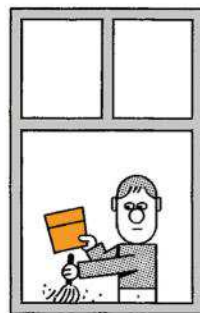
The clothing-manufacturing operations in Chinatown tend to be small scale. After visiting the *centro storico*, I drove through the areas around Prato. I passed block after block of businesses with Chinese characters next to English phrases: Normcore, Feel Good, Miss & Yes. Giant, low-slung buildings combined manufacturing areas with showrooms where buyers could examine samples and place orders. Jessica Moloney, a London-born brand consultant and agent for importers, explained to me, "If you've got three to six months to wait and you need five hundred to a thousand pieces, you go to China. But if you have only two weeks and need a hundred pieces, you come to Prato." She noted, "TJ Maxx is everywhere here. I don't know anyone who isn't working with them."

The word *prato* means "meadow,"

and even here, amid structures that evoked the sprawl outside an airport, there were green spaces. In June of 2016, in one of the grassy squares bordered by cluster pines, Chinese locals held a violent protest, after two and a half years of mounting tensions. In 2013, an electrical short had caused a fire that destroyed a workshop called Teresa Moda, killing seven Chinese workers. The victims had both worked and slept in the buildings. One had died while trying to squeeze through a barred window. "I could hear the cries of the Chinese inside," an off-duty carabinieri who battled the fire told *Corriere della Sera*.

After the fire, the Prato authorities, with no small amount of condescension, said they'd made up their minds that they could no longer neglect the strangers living among them. They would offer Chinese immigrants the blessings of workplace protections, legal wages, and sanitary standards. Italian officials did a sweep of the Prato area, and discovered a great many unregistered mills. Between 2014 and 2017, they conducted inspections of more than eight thousand Chinese-run businesses. They knocked on the doors of mills at night and without warning, before owners could clean up, or close, or reopen down the street under a new name. Officially, the raids, part of a program called Lavoro Sicuro ("Safe Workplace"), were not focussed on any ethnicity. But everyone called them "the Chinese raids," including one of the architects of the plan, Renzo Berti, the director of the disease-prevention unit at the central-Tuscany department of health. Berti told me that the effort had improved the working conditions in the Chinese-owned mills. When the raids started, he said, ninety-three per cent of the inspected businesses were committing violations, from illegal dormitories to exposed wiring. Now the rate was thirty-five per cent. "This has been like a steamroller," he said. "We are having our effect."

The Italians have also cracked down on crime in the Chinese community. In January, the police arrested



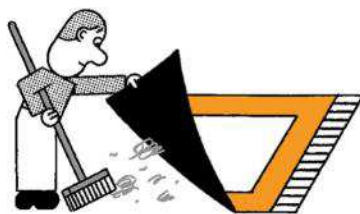


Zhang Naizhong, the alleged kingpin of the Chinese-Italian mafia, which, they said, had a large presence in Prato. Francesco Nannucci, of the Prato investigative unit, told me that Zhang was the *padrino*—the godfather. He added, with a laugh, “They learned their structure from the Italians.” (The Italian Mob is also active in Prato, but Nannucci said that the two groups don’t interact.) Nannucci estimates that eighty per cent of the city’s Chinese mills paid protection money to Zhang’s organization, which was also involved in drugs, prostitution, and gambling. (A recent pretrial tribunal cast doubt on the evidence, though Zhang remains under house arrest.) Before arresting Zhang, Nannucci said, police had followed him from Rome to Prato. He changed cars eight times along the way, to thwart efforts to track him; visited a restaurant, where local Chinese businessmen lined up at his table and bowed; and was eventually arrested at a hotel in Prato. Nannucci was pleased with the operation, but disappointed that he’d received little help from the Chinese Pratans. “There’s a lot of *omertà*,” he said.

The Chinese see the raids and Zhang’s arrest primarily as harassment. One Chinese mill owner even pulled out a gun when police officers came to inspect his building. (The gun turned out to be fake.) Armando Chang, who owns a travel agency in the Prato area, told me, “When the Italians do an investigation, the ugly thing, in my opinion, is that they first develop a theory, then try to find the facts that go with it.” He claimed that he’d never even heard of a local Chinese mafia. “I learned about them from Bruce Lee movies,” he said. “But I’ve never seen them here.” A group of Chinese professionals told me it wasn’t a coincidence that the number of raids had increased during the run-up to the national elections.

During a raid in June of 2016, an elderly Chinese man got into an altercation with a carabinieri while trying to leave the mill where he worked. The man, who was carrying an infant, was reportedly jostled, and the baby fell and was injured. Word spread on social media, and several hundred

Chinese soon gathered in the square, shouting and throwing rocks and bottles. Police put down the protest, and the regional government promised more raids. At that point, the Chinese foreign ministry stepped in and gently warned the Italians not to pick on its citizens. (Nearly all Chinese-born Pratans remain citizens of China.) The two sides promised to work together, but tensions remain high. Luca Zhou, the head of the



Italian branch of Ramunion, a Chinese charity, said, “They rent us the factories, but they don’t want to communicate with us. We need more friendship. We should be like brothers.”

On the same Sunday, I walked across the square where the protest had taken place, and arrived at a huge industrial building whose façade still bore the words “BP Studio,” the name of the well-known Florentine fashion house that had once occupied the space. Laundry was drying on a line. The employees standing at the entrance looked less than thrilled to see me, but they allowed me to go inside. The building, whose interior was almost the size of a soccer field, had an open floor plan; rows of Chinese women, and a few men, sewed and worked leather under fluorescent lights, even though it was Sunday. The work did not seem hard so much as unending: some people were napping, their heads resting on the sewing tables. Children played in corners or watched TV. Blouses, bright-red fake-leather bags, and key chains were stacked in neat piles, ready to be shipped. This was a quintessential *pronto moda* factory, able to produce clothes and accessories quickly in an era in which the fashion seasons have given way to a series of frantic commissions prompted by viral Instagram posts. A large window in the work-

shop looked out onto hilly pastures. Along a ridge, a shepherd was guiding a flock of sheep.

While I was in Tuscany, a Chinese mill owner I’ll call Enrico—most Chinese immigrants adopt Italian first names—permitted me to visit his operation. He had requested anonymity because the fashion companies require vendors to sign confidentiality agreements. In 1988, when Enrico was thirteen, he emigrated from Wenzhou with his mother. The locals were friendly at first, he said, but then, as more Wenzhouans came, the warm feelings faded. But he never seriously considered leaving. “We Chinese have a culture of adapting to the moment,” he said. He told me that, as an entrepreneur, he did everything by the book—he even had a pension program for employees. But he acknowledged that not all Chinese factory owners worked this way. “If you play too closely by the rules, you’ll never get started,” he said. He clarified: “A Chinese person who uses a shortcut always does the hard work, too. Using the same shortcut, an Italian will work seven to eight hours. A Chinese person, if there’s a goal, will work twelve.”

Enrico’s operation, which focussed on leather goods, had a much more refined atmosphere than factories that I had visited while accompanying police on raids. It was not unusual for a mill manager to claim that he lived alone in the adjacent bedrooms; in response, the Italian officials would point to long rows of slippers. Then the police would search the premises for undocumented workers, and a finance inspector would look for evidence of cash payments. (During one raid, I saw a health inspector peer into a rice cooker in a hallway and ask a colleague, “What the fuck are they eating here?” “Some sort of soup,” the colleague answered, with a shrug.) In the end, the authorities would tabulate a fine, which usually came to several hundred euros. (“They treat us like an A.T.M.,” Francesco Xia complained to me.) Undocumented immigrants were taken to police stations, where they had little to fear. Extended detention was rare, and Italy couldn’t expel them to China without proof of their Chinese citizenship.

In contrast to those more humble workshops, Enrico's factory reminded me of a well-run electronics factory. The workers ate in a proper lunchroom and wore crisp uniforms. The ductwork was professional, and the wiring was encased in a dropped ceiling. The labor was divided up into stations: bending the leather into a bag shape, sewing it, installing an inner lining, and attaching buckles and straps. Leather sections waiting to be stitched into bags were neatly laid out on rolling carts, like slabs of tuna at a sushi counter. "I run a sort of special operation," Enrico said with pride. "Famous brands send us the material, and we make the finished product."

Italy's luxury-fashion industry has long struggled to lower costs without compromising on quality. In the seventies and eighties, the Pratan system of interconnected workshops ran smoothly, but in the nineties, as trade barriers fell around the world, fashion houses saw an opportunity too good to resist. Why not manufacture "Made in Italy" products in Eastern Europe and in China? They would still be designed in Milan or Florence, so the label wouldn't be a complete lie. Reports of the practice leaked out, and the brands found themselves under pressure to market their products more honestly. In 2010, Santo Versace—a politician who is also the chairman of the Versace fashion house—championed a law that contained a very Italian compromise: if two of the steps in the manufacturing process took place in Italy, the item could bear the valuable label. But the famous fashion companies continued to look for ways to make the "Made in Italy" tag mean what it was supposed to mean without forgoing profits.

As I was walking around Enrico's shop, I turned a corner and discovered dozens of nylon Prada briefcases hanging on hooks. I'd just seen the same bags for sale in Florence, for about two thousand dollars each. Around another corner were leather Dolce & Gabbana shoulder bags, with the brand's distinctive "DG" rhinestone buckles. There was an area dedicated to an elite French company's bags, which also retailed at around two thousand dollars each. On one table was a cardboard prototype. Enrico showed me the storeroom where these riches were locked up at night.

I thought of a recent visit that I had made to Scandicci, the iconic Italian leatherwork village, just outside Florence. I'd met an artisan named Andrea Calistri, whose workshop was filled with mementos from three generations of leatherworkers. He told me that he had done jobs for Gucci, Dolce & Gabbana, and Prada, but that he objected to their use of mills that violated labor laws. He had helped found an association, called "100% Made in Italy," that focussed on insuring proper labor practices, but his rhetoric was unmistakably nativist. "'Made in Italy' means made by *Italians*!" he told me. He was surrounded by shelves filled with maroon leather handbags. They were supple and gorgeous. Then again, so were the bags that Enrico's employees were making.

Another Chinese entrepreneur in Prato, whom I'll call Arturo, met me in his office; two elegant Gucci bags sat on a table in front of him. The big fashion brands, he said, all have some factories of their own. (In Scandicci, I saw a new factory emblazoned with a giant "PRADA" on the façade.) But, Arturo went on, "think about it—they sell ten thousand bags a *month*. How are they going to produce that many? They cut the leather and make the prototypes, but that's it." He added that he had turned down work from Prada be-

cause the company didn't pay enough. (In a statement, Prada said that it "stands out for its strong ties with the artisanal craft experience typical of the Italian tradition.")

A third Chinese proprietor, whom I'll call Luigi, estimated that more than a hundred Chinese-owned workshops in Tuscany were assembling bags for the famous fashion houses. Each of these workshops, in turn, used five to ten subcontractors for tasks like stitching straps and finishing hardware. All the proprietors I met with spoke adequate Italian, but Luigi's was truly fluent. He said that his operation had filled orders from Chloé, Burberry, Fendi, Balenciaga, Saint Laurent, and Chanel. "On the level of craftsmanship, Chanel is the *top*," he said, using the English word. "They're the fussiest about the quality." Working for a company like Fendi wasn't easy for a Chinese person, he went on. You had to "acquire an Italian mentality" and "conceive of the bag as an Italian would." He explained, "A Chinese person thinks only that he has to get so many bags done, but behind every bag there's a precise study of what it's about. I think the Italians are the greatest artisans in the world."

Arturo's factory was clean and organized. When the workers used sprays



"He loved New York."



to dye leather, they put on masks. Representatives from the fashion brands, I was told, came to inspect the first round of bags; the rest of the order was then made to their specifications. Gucci is known for giving extensive instructions, with precise demands about the number and the length of stitches. Hiring highly skilled workers was therefore essential.

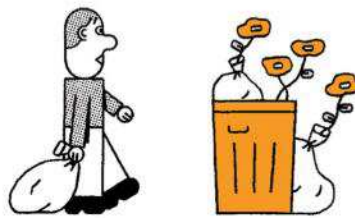
Arturo took me through the economics of doing work for luxury-fashion brands. He was paid a set fee for an order, no matter how long it took to complete. He generally lost money on the first bags he finished, but his workers got much faster with repetition, and the later iterations were profitable. When he was fulfilling Gucci contracts, he said, the company paid him an average of nineteen euros an hour. He showed me a bag that featured the company's insignia fabric, with its interlocking "G"s, and said, "This fabric would cost fifteen euros a metre. But they make millions and millions of metres, so they don't pay fifteen. Maybe ten. The leather here costs maybe fifteen to twenty euros. It's two euros for the zipper, plus the money they pay us—that's the cost. And they put it on the market at between ten and fifteen times that cost." The most skilled workers at higher-end Chinese factories make as much as two thousand euros a month—a middle-class living in Italy.

Luigi told me that, in recent years, the big fashion houses had grown more careful about their outsourcing, and had begun conducting their own private inspections of contractors' facilities. "I undergo seven audits a year for seven brands!" he said. "Conditions of work, contract terms, safety—they put your company under a microscope." The Chinese proprietors I spoke with all said that it was useful to have an Italian business partner. Luigi had one, and also several Italians working on the factory floor. He explained that having Italian employees made it "easier to get work, because the big houses feel more trusting." He said that it also meant no fashion house would dare ask him to accept less money than what it would pay an Italian.

In 2014, an Italian artisan spoke to the investigative television journalist

Sabrina Giannini. Gucci had given him a big contract, he said, but the pay was so low—twenty-four euros a bag—that he had subcontracted the work to a Chinese mill, where employees worked fourteen-hour days and were paid half what he made. When the bags made it to stores, they were priced at between eight hundred and two thousand dollars. An inspector for Gucci told Giannini that he saw no reason to ask employees about their working conditions. (Gucci denounced the television report as "false" and "not evidence of our reality.") The company says that, in the past few years, it has increased scrutiny of its supply chain, including subcontractors, and has "black-listed" around seventy manufacturers.)

Recently, many Chinese mill owners have started hiring workers from countries including Syria, Pakistan, and Senegal. Several weeks before I arrived in the Prato area, a small protest was held outside a local workshop that regularly received subcontracts from a nearby firm that produces metalwork for well-known fashion brands. The workshop's Chinese proprietor had abruptly closed the operation, locking out his employees, who were mostly Senegalese, and stiffing them of their wages. They found him around the corner, in another mill that he owned, and he agreed to pay them if they met him back at the workshop. When they returned to the factory, he greeted them



at the front door, and asked them to wait a minute for their money. He then walked out the back door and got into a waiting car.

Following this Keystone Cops farce, a national labor union encouraged the employees to stage several public protests. One of the employees who protested later told me that he had been paid only twelve hundred euros a month, with no benefits, to work in a

freezing-cold room. He remembered working on products for companies including Ferragamo, Prada, and Dior. The crew chief, he said, "would scream at us to work faster, to get more pieces done." (The employees were officially paid a higher salary, to comply with the law, but, according to a union representative, managers required them to withdraw their "extra" wages and give that money to the owner.)

The workshop has now gone out of business—the employees were never paid what they were owed. But an enterprise run by the same owners, in the same location, continues to operate. In February, it received an order, from the same subcontracting firm, to finish seven hundred and eighty-five Chanel buckles.

After Italy became a unified nation, in 1861, Massimo d'Azeglio, a Piedmontese statesman and novelist, is said to have commented, "Now that there is an Italy, it will be necessary to make the Italians." But, until recently, few people had thought about how to make a hyphenated Italian. During one of the raids, I asked an Italian official who was there to translate Mandarin why there weren't more Chinese Pratan translators. If there were, I suggested, the mill workers might be more responsive to questions, and would not be able to talk to one another privately by switching to the Wenzhou dialect, which not even Mandarin speakers understand. She answered, brightly, "Because we're *Italians!*"

Tuscans may fantasize about walling themselves off from the forces of globalism, but, as the Chinese-Italian economic relationship grows ever more complex, the illusion is getting harder to maintain. The per-capita income in Wenzhou is now more than a hundred times what it was when the migration to Prato began. As a result, wage expectations in the Chinese factories in Prato are increasing. Meanwhile, the travel agent Armando Chang told me, the Chinese "are no longer coming in the same numbers." Some are even returning to Wenzhou from Prato. "You can make more money back home," Enrico said. He told me that, partly because of rising salaries in Wenzhou, he paid his Chinese manager more than he would pay an Italian.

The Chinese community in Prato is evolving rapidly. Many of the immigrants' children, having lived in Italy since birth, are looking beyond the garment and leather-goods industries. "Our kids don't want to make bags," Arturo complained. A friend of his agreed, telling me, "They all want to go to the Bocconi now!" (The Bocconi is an elite private university in Milan.) I met one such girl, an eighteen-year-old named Luisa, at a pleasant Chinese bistro called Ravioli di Cristina. (The Italians call dumplings "Chinese ravioli.") Her father sold coffee-vending machines to the Chinese mills. Chinese Pratans, she complained, thought only about money, so she had mostly Italian friends. When the young Chinese Pratan waiter, who was flirting with her, urged her to listen to a Korean pop song, she countered by recommending a song by the American d.j. duo the Chainsmokers. Her public school, Buzzi, on the eastern edge of Prato, has few Chinese students, and that—along with its specialization in engineering—was why she'd chosen it. "In the beginning, the other students ignore you," she said. But she had gradually formed friendships. "They still sometimes say racist things—they call me Yellow Face—but I joke back at them," she said.

Deborah Sarmento, a Pratan who started a tutoring organization for Chinese children whose parents work long hours, views Chinese immigration more philosophically than many of her neighbors: what the Pratans had to do, she said, was embrace what was special in their tradition while also learning from the Chinese. "We've been occupied over and over since we were Borgo al Cornio," she said. "First the Etruscans, then the Longobards, then the Florentines and the Spanish. And we were always able to overcome by looking at our roots. It gives you a chance to really understand what it means to be from Prato."

Sara Lin, a thirty-eight-year-old fashion designer with a blond streak in her short black hair, is another sign of change. Her parents had brought her with them to Italy when she was seven; her father worked in textiles near Milan, and her mother had a dress-making company in Tuscany. At first, Lin felt disoriented. "All the Italians



*"Notice that, once the twentysomething men enter the environment, the chameleon instantly develops an opinion on David Foster Wallace."*

looked the same," she recalled. "It was hard to tell one face from another." But she soon settled in and began to excel at school, in part because she was good at math. In her early teens, she returned to China for two years to improve her Chinese and learn about the culture. She didn't fit in. "That was a more racist society than the one here!" she said.

After finishing high school, she entered the fashion industry. Later, she and her husband worked on bags for Valentino and Gucci. Eventually, she realized that she wanted more—she wanted to design. In 2008, she acquired the rights to a once famous Florentine handbag brand, Desmo. "At first, I encountered a lot of resistance and defiance from the Florentine inner crowd," she recalled. But Lin, along with an Italian business partner, successfully revived Desmo, creating a line of leather bags that sell for a few hundred dollars each. (The company's Web site notes that all Desmo bags are "Made in Tuscany" and "crafted by the skillful hands of experts.") Lin then had a more ambitious idea: to make a "deconstructable" purse. She showed me what she called a Pop Bag. You took bright, playful component pieces—a back, a front, adjustable straps, and so on—and clipped them together to build

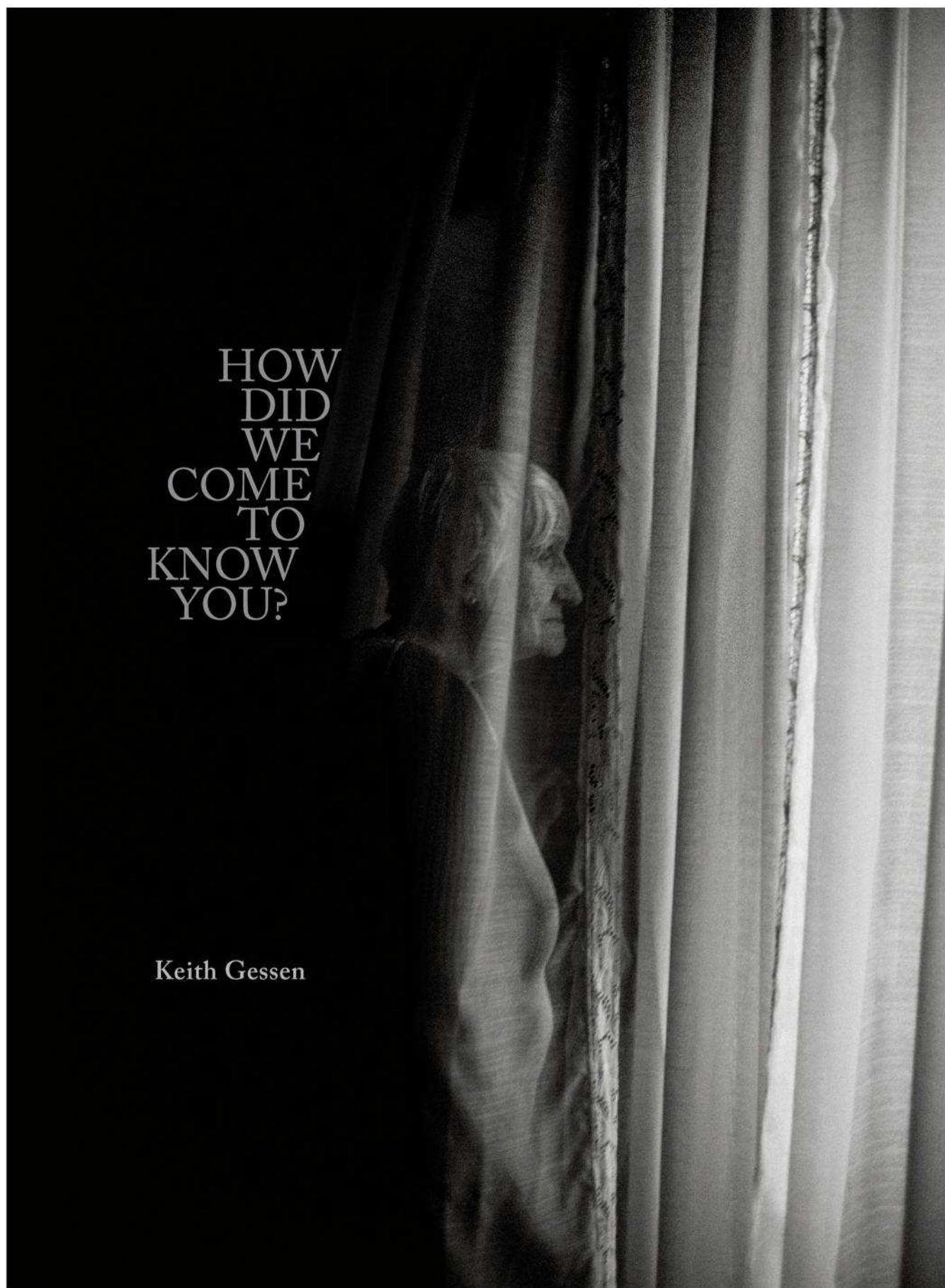
your own bag. You could slot in different colored panels, depending on your preferences. Yes, it was silly, but it was also a modern and witty gloss on what many other Chinese were doing around Prato: assembling bags.

Lin felt that she had both the grit of the Chinese—"When I was pregnant, nineteen years ago, I was in the workshop at noon and giving birth at three"—and the flexibility of the Italians. China gave her discipline; Italy gave her possibilities. She argued that, "in China, what a man can do with one word takes a woman five. A woman in China needs grinding determination and force. But here in Italy it's the reverse. A woman, one word. A man, five." In 2016, Lin opened her first Pop Bag store, full of glistening fixtures and backlit shelving, on Via Calimala, in Florence. And, a few weeks ago, she opened a kiosk at the Time Warner Center, in New York City. She had initially imagined something as splashy as her Florentine boutique, but Manhattan is a long way from Prato, and she is a careful entrepreneur. Her Pop Bags are also sold in China. When I asked her if Chinese sales were helped by the fact that she was born there, she was unsure how to respond. "I don't know," she said. "We haven't done a study on it." ♦



HOW  
DID  
WE  
COME  
TO  
KNOW  
YOU?

Keith Gessen



I was sitting in the kitchen one evening, checking my e-mail, when my grandmother told me she was going for a walk. It was snowing a little, and slippery—I could see that—but it wasn't *too* slippery. Despite the cold, my grandmother had been out earlier to get some groceries and had done just fine. I felt like I should go with her, but I also wanted to continue checking my e-mail. Was I just going to spend my whole life going out with my grandmother whenever the notion struck her? That was no way to live. I went over and kissed her on the forehead and told her to have a good walk.

Not thirty minutes later, I heard a sharp cry in the stairwell. At first, I thought it was a dog or a child, but then I realized exactly who it was. I ran out onto the landing; my grandmother was lying on her back at the bottom of the stairs. Her eyes were open, and she was holding her head and looking at me. She was scared. I went down and helped her up; her thick pink coat had cushioned the fall, but when I looked at the back of her head I saw that there was blood. "Oh, Andryushenka," she said. "I'm so stupid. I'm so stupid. My head is spinning."

I got her upstairs, helped her out of her coat, then laid her down on her bed and looked up the number for an ambulance. It was 03. I dialed it and explained that my grandmother had hit her head. The woman on the other end asked if I thought my grandmother was in danger. I had no idea. "Is she conscious?" the woman asked. I said yes. This apparently helped her make a determination as to where to send us. She said that an ambulance would be there in twenty minutes, and it was.

I'll never forget the view of Moscow I got from the back of that ambulance as we stopped and started through the traffic on the Garden Ring. After a while, my grandmother fell asleep on the gurney; one of the paramedics was sitting in the back with us, playing with his phone, and when I asked if it was all right for her to fall asleep he said yes. I watched the city out the back window. It was covered with a thin layer of snow. People walked, in black coats and black hats and black shoes, trying to keep close to the buildings, for warmth.

When we finally got off the Garden Ring and onto Kiev Highway, I asked the paramedic sitting with me how much longer it would take.

"About an hour," he said.

"An hour? There's nothing closer?"

"They told us to route her to the neurological clinic," he said, "because it's a head injury. Don't worry, it's a good clinic."

We kept going, through the industrial neighborhoods and forests at the city's southern edge.

The hospital was in the woods. In the dim light, as we pulled into the driveway, I could see a long, four-story yellow brick building. It looked old; it might have been a village hospital from before the Revolution. The paramedics carefully rolled my grandmother out of the ambulance and into the hospital. She was now awake. She did not seem disturbed by the proceedings; in fact, she seemed to like the attention. Her health had been troubling her, and here were some people who were taking it seriously. "Thank you," she kept saying to the paramedics. "Thank you."

I had moved to Moscow a few months earlier, in the summer of 2008, to take care of my grandmother. She was almost ninety. My brother Dima and I were her only family; her lone child, our mother, had died when I was a teen-ager. Baba Seva now lived by herself in her old apartment in the center of the city, a mile from the Kremlin. When I called to tell her I was coming, she sounded happy, and a little confused.

My parents and my brother and I left the Soviet Union in 1981. I was six and Dima was sixteen, and that made all the difference. I became an American, whereas Dima remained essentially Russian. As soon as the Soviet Union collapsed, he returned to Moscow to make his fortune. Since then, he had made and lost several fortunes; where things stood now, I wasn't sure. But one day he Gchatted me to ask if I could come to Moscow and stay with Baba Seva while he went to London for an unspecified period of time.

"Why do you need to go to London?"

"I'll explain when I see you."

"You want me to drop everything

and travel halfway across the world and you can't even tell me why?"

Something petulant came out in me when I was dealing with my older brother. I hated it, but couldn't help myself.

Dima said, "If you don't want to come, say so. But I'm not discussing this on Gchat."

"You know," I said, "there's a way to take it off the record. No one will be able to see it."

"Don't be an idiot."

He meant to imply that he was involved with some *very serious people* who would not be so easily deterred from reading his Gchats. Maybe that was true, maybe it wasn't. With Dima, the line between the concepts of truth and untruth was always shifting.

As for me, I wasn't really an idiot. But neither was I not an idiot. I had spent four long years of college and then eight much longer years of grad school studying Russian literature and history, drinking beer, and winning the Grad Student Cup hockey tournament (five times!); then I had spent three years on the job market, with zero results. By the time Dima wrote me, I had exhausted all the available postgraduate fellowships and didn't have enough money to continue living, even very frugally, in New York. In short, on the question of whether or not I was an idiot, there was evidence on both sides.

"Can I use your car?"

"I sold it."

"Dude. How long are you leaving for?"

"I don't know," Dima said. "And I already left."

"Oh," I said.

In truth, I was desperate to leave New York. And Moscow was a special place for me. It was the city where my parents had grown up, where they had met; it was the city where I was born. I hadn't been there in years. In the course of a few grad-school summer visits, I'd grown tired of its poverty and hopelessness: the aggressive drunks on the subway; the thugs in tracksuits and leather jackets eying everyone; the guy who ate from the dumpster next to my grandmother's place, periodically yelling, "Fuckers! Bloodsuckers!" and then returning to his food. It was a big, ugly,



dangerous city, but it meant more to me than just about any other place.

"O.K." I wrote.

"O.K.?"

"Yeah," I said. "Why not."

A few days later, I went to the Russian Consulate, on the Upper East Side, stood in line for an hour, and got a one-year visa. Then I wrapped things up in New York: I sublet my room, returned my books to the library, and fetched my hockey stuff from a locker at the rink. It was all a big hassle, and expensive, but I spent the whole time imagining the different life I would soon be living, the different person I'd become. Perhaps there was even some way I might be able to use my grandmother's life story as the basis for a job-winning journal article.

Baba Seva—Seva Efraimovna Gekhtman—was born in a small town in Ukraine in 1919. Her father was an accountant at a textile factory and her mother was a nurse. Her parents moved to Moscow with her and her brothers when she was a child. I knew that she had excelled in school and had been admitted to Moscow State University, the best and oldest university in Russia, where she studied history. I knew that at Moscow State, not long after the German invasion, she had met a young law student, my grandfather, and that they had fallen in love and married. Then he was killed near Vyazma in the second year of the war, just a month after my mother was born. I knew that after the war my grandmother had started lecturing at Moscow State, and had consulted on a film about Ivan the Great ("gatherer of the lands of Rus") which so reminded Joseph Stalin of himself that he gave her an apartment in central Moscow; that despite this she was forced out of Moscow State a few years later, at the height of the "anti-cosmopolitan"—i.e., anti-Jewish—campaign; and that she got by after that as a tutor and as a translator from other Slavic languages. I knew that she had got remarried, in late middle age, to a sweet, forgetful geophysicist, whom we called Uncle Lev, and moved with him to the nuclear-research town of Dubna—vacating the Stalin apartment for my parents, and then eventually for my brother—before moving back, a cou-

ple of years before I showed up, after Uncle Lev died in his sleep.

But there was a lot I didn't know. I didn't know what her life had been like after the war, or whether, before the war, during the purges, she had had any knowledge, or any sense, of what was happening in the country. If not, why not? If so, how had she lived with that knowledge? I pictured myself sitting monastically in my room and setting down my grandmother's stories in a publishable way.

The next thing I knew, I was standing in the passport-control line in the grim basement of Sheremetyevo-2 International Airport. It seemed to never change. As long as I'd been flying here, they made you come down to this basement and wait in line before you got your bags. It was like a purgatory after which you entered something other than heaven. A young, blond, unsmiling border guard took my battered blue American passport with mild disgust. He checked my name against the terrorist database and buzzed me through the gate to the other side.

I was in Russia again.

Baba Seva's apartment was on the second floor of a white five-story building off a leafy courtyard. I entered the courtyard and tapped in the code for the front door—I still remembered it—and lugged my suitcase up the stairs. My grandmother came to the door. She was tiny. She had always been small, but now she was even smaller, and the gray hair on her head was even thinner. For a moment, I was worried she wouldn't know who I was. But then she said, "Andryushik. You're here." She seemed to have mixed feelings about it.

I came in.

She wanted to feed me. Slowly and deliberately, she heated up potato soup, *kotlety* (Russian meatballs), and sliced fried potatoes. She moved around the kitchen at a glacial pace and was unsteady on her feet, but there were many things to hold on to in that old kitchen, and she knew exactly where they were. Her hearing had declined considerably since my last visit, so I waited while she worked and then helped her plate the food. Finally, we sat. She asked me about my life in America.

"Where do you live?"

"New York."

"What?"

"New York."

"Oh. Do you live in a house, or an apartment?"

"An apartment."

"What?"

"An apartment."

"Do you own it?"

"I rent it. With roommates."

"What?"

"I share it. It's like a communal apartment."

"Are you married?"

"No."

"No?"

"No."

"Do you have kids?"

"No."

"No kids?"

"No. In America," I half-lied, "people don't have kids until later."

Satisfied, or partly satisfied, she then asked me how long I intended to stay.

"Until Dima comes back," I said.

"What?" she said.

"Until Dima comes back," I said.

She took that in.

"Andryusha," she said. "Do you know my friend Musya?"

"Of course," I said.

"She's a very close friend of mine," my grandmother explained. "And right now she's at her dacha." Musya, or Emma Abramovna, was my grandmother's oldest living friend. An émigré from Poland, she had been a literature professor who had managed to hang on at Moscow State despite the anti-Jewish campaign; long since retired, she still had a dacha at Peredelkino, the old writers' colony. My grandmother had lost her own dacha in the nineties, after Uncle Lev got swindled out of his share in a geological-exploration company he'd founded with some fellow-scientists.

"I think," she said now, "that next summer she's going to invite me to stay with her."

"Yes? She said that?"

"No," my grandmother said. "But I hope she does."

"That sounds good," I said. In August, most Muscovites left for their dachas; clearly, my grandmother's inability to do the same was weighing on her mind.

We had finished eating, and my grandmother casually reached into her mouth and took out her teeth. She put them in a little teacup on the table. "I need to rest my gums," she said, toothlessly.

"Of course," I said.

"Tell me," she said, in the same exploratory tone as earlier. "Do you know my grandson, Dima?"

"Of course," I said. "He's my brother."

"Oh." My grandmother sighed, as if she couldn't entirely trust someone who knew Dima. "Do you know where he is?"

"He's in London," I said.

"He never comes to see me," my grandmother said.

"That's not true."

"No, it is. Ever since he got me to sign over the apartment, he hasn't been interested in me at all."

"Grandma!" I said. "That's definitely not true." It was true that, a few years earlier, Dima had put the apartment in his name—under post-Soviet-style gentrification, little old ladies who owned prime Moscow real estate tended to have all sorts of misfortunes befall them. From a safety perspective, it had been the right move. But I could see now that, from my grandmother's perspective, it looked suspicious.

"Andryusha," she said. "You are such a dear person to me. To our whole family. But I can't remember right now. How did we come to know you?"

I was momentarily speechless.

"I'm your grandson," I said. There was an element of pleading in my voice.

"What?"

"I'm your grandson."

"My grandson," she repeated.

"You had a daughter, do you remember?"

"Yes," she said, uncertainly, then remembered. "Yes. My little daughter." She thought a moment longer. "She went to America," my grandmother said. "She went to America and died."

"That's right," I said.

"And you—" she said now.

"I'm her son."

My grandmother took this in. "Then why did you come here?" she said.

I didn't understand.

"This is a terrible country. My Yolka took you to America. Why did you come back?" She seemed angry.

I was again at a loss for words. Why had I come? Because Dima had asked me to. And because I wanted to help my grandmother. And because I thought it would help me find a topic for an article, which would then help me to get a tenure-track job. I decided to go with the one that seemed most practical. "For work," I said. "I need to do some research."

"Oh," she said. "All right." She, too, had had to work in this terrible country, and she could understand.

Momentarily satisfied, my grandmother excused herself and went to her room to lie down.

From inside, the hospital looked even older. A rickety elevator took us to the top floor, and then we walked down a dim corridor. We arrived at an open door, where a young man in green hospital scrubs with dark circles under his eyes sat smoking a cigarette. This turned out to be the head neurologist. "Hello, Arkady Ivanovich," one of the paramedics said. "Woman fell down, hit her head, there's some minor bleeding. Dispatcher said we should take her to you."

"Take her to examination room 410, please," the neurologist said, and then followed us there.

For the first few weeks after I'd arrived, I'd followed my grandmother everywhere: room to room in the apartment, store to store on her interminable

grocery runs, and once a week to Emma Abramovna's, to drink tea and talk about the old days, Emma Abramovna in a cheerful key, my grandmother in a minor one. "Everyone I know has died," my grandmother liked to say. "I am all alone." Following her around had made me depressed and lonely, too. And I'd had some bad luck. I got hit in the head with a gun while out one night with some expats; I got rejected from a series of pickup hockey games; my grandmother remembered nothing of the purges. But eventually my luck had turned. I found a hockey game; I found some friends; I even met a girl, a literature grad student named Yulia. I thought maybe I was getting the hang of this country, this life. And then my grandmother fell down the stairs.

As I walked to the examination room, I felt a little as my grandmother did—it was a relief to have her and her health finally in the hands of professionals—but I was also apprehensive. This place was dirty and far from home. I wasn't sure if I could trust these people. For reasons I didn't understand, the paramedics hung around outside the doorway of the examination room, even after they'd moved my grandmother to the examination table and repossessed their gurney. Noting this, the doctor looked from them to me.

"You know," he said very quietly, "they don't get paid very much."

"Oh!" I said. I pulled out my wallet



*"This one simple draping trick will make people think you work out a lot."*





*"Wow, Ethan is really misreading the current cultural climate."*

and found five hundred rubles—sixteen dollars—and handed them to the paramedic who'd sat in back with me.

"Thank you," he said, and left.

In the examination room, the doctor checked the back of my grandmother's head, shined a light in her eyes, and asked her some questions. When he was done, he told her and me that she was safe for the moment but that it would be wise to keep an eye on her and run some tests.

"What do you think, Seva Efraimovna?" he asked her gently.

My grandmother turned to me. "Whatever Andryusha thinks is best," she said.

I straightened up. "Would we be able to go home tomorrow?" I asked.

"No," the doctor said. "This will take a week."

"A week?" In America, I would have been concerned about the cost; in Russia, it was something else. The medical care was free. I looked around the room, with its high ceiling and chipped blue paint.

The doctor followed my gaze. "It doesn't look like much, but this is a decent hospital," he said. "I can't force you to keep her here, but sometimes the cra-

nial bleeding from a fall like this doesn't show up right away. Of course, there may not be any bleeding. It's up to you."

I felt the pressure of medical expertise. If she dies, or suffers brain damage, he was saying, because you thought that our peeling paint meant that we didn't know anything about medicine—well, it'll be on you, not me.

"Grandma," I said. "Do you want to stay here a little so they can run some tests?"

"O.K.," my grandmother said. "If you think I should, I will."

I didn't know what to think. But I felt like I had no other choice. "I do," I said.

"Then O.K."

"O.K.," the doctor said. "Visiting hours are noon to eight. I'll have a nurse bring her to her room."

And he left. A few minutes later, a nurse came with a wheelchair, put my grandmother in it, and then wheeled her to a bed in a large room down the hall. At the nurse's signal, we lifted my grandmother from the wheelchair to the bed; she was incredibly light.

I wrote down my cell-phone number. "I will be back tomorrow," I told my grandmother.

"O.K.," she said. "Do you have the key to my apartment?"

"I do."

"Good. There is still some soup—make sure you eat it."

"O.K.," I said. I kissed her on the forehead and left.

The metro was closed by the time I got out of the hospital; I took an expensive cab home. At the apartment, I heated up the potato soup and opened my computer. In the Gchat bar, Dima's little green light was on.

"Grandma's in the hospital," I wrote him.

He wrote back right away. "What??"

"She fell down the stairs and hit her head. The doctor says it's not dangerous."

"Where were you when this happened?"

"I was in the apartment."

"I told you about those stairs!"

I didn't say anything to that. A minute later, the landline rang. It was Dima.

"Which hospital is she in?"

"Neurological Clinic No. 8." I had taken a card with me. "It's way out at the end of Kiev Highway."

"Fuck!" Dima said. "That's a state hospital. They have private hospitals now where you can get decent care."

I didn't say anything. Of course I'd had no idea. Probably I should have called Dima right away. Everything had happened so quickly.

"Can you move her?" Dima said.

"This place is O.K.," I said. "It's not bad. And it's devoted to neurology."

"Move her to the American Clinic," Dima said. "It's right near Prospekt Mira. You'll be able to walk there."

"How much does it cost?"

"I'll pay for it," Dima said.

"I'll think about it," I said. I didn't want to put my grandmother back in an ambulance for two hours while she still had a head wound. And I didn't want Dima paying for her.

"If you keep her at this place, at least give the doctor some money," he said. "Give him three thousand rubles." A hundred dollars. "And give the nurse five hundred. It'll help."

"O.K.," I said.

"You had one thing to do," Dima said, before hanging up. "You had one fucking thing you were supposed to do."

My soup had partly boiled out of the saucepan. I ate what remained, then spent an hour online reading about head trauma. Then I went to bed. It was the first time in my life I'd had the family apartment all to myself. I slept badly.

I decided not to move my grandmother. She was comfortable in her room, and the staff was attentive. I was nervous about paying money to the doctor, but it worked out. I had been unable to find any envelopes in my grandmother's apartment, and so I folded my three thousand-ruble bills into a ripped-out page from one of my notebooks; this looked pretty ridiculous, and when I caught the doctor in his little office and thrust it at him he demurred. But I insisted. "Please," I said. Finally, he agreed and, opening the top drawer of his desk, stuffed the makeshift envelope inside. "It's unnecessary," he said, looking at me with dignity. "But thank you."

And that was that. No receipt, no exchange of goods, and afterward I went back to my grandmother's room. But the payment worked. I felt as if I had bought a small part of the hospital. I was no longer a stranger there. And after I paid off the nurses, too, I noticed that my grandmother had an extra blanket and that they rolled a television into her room.

My grandmother had a roommate, a garrulous woman named Vladlenna. She was just a few years younger than my grandmother, but large where my grandmother was small, and loud where my grandmother was quiet. On the morning of my first visit, I found Vladlenna regaling my grandmother with tales of her health from the next bed. "Oh, Vladlenna Viktorovna, this is my grandson Andrei," my grandmother said.

"Nice to meet you, Andryusha!" Vladlenna hollered from her bed. "Seva," she asked, "is this guy married?"

"I'm afraid not," my grandmother said.

"Well, we'll take care of that!" Vladlenna said. "I know lots of girls!" I smiled politely. But the truth was, if it weren't for the recent advent of Yulia, I'd have asked Vladlenna for some phone numbers.

I stayed until evening, alternately

working on my laptop while my grandmother napped and exchanging pleasantries with Vladlenna. Then I started on the long, cold ride home.

And so it was every day. I was able to get some work done in the morning, then take the subway to the bus, and spend the remainder of the day with my grandmother. The CT scan showed no internal bleeding, but the doctors proceeded to do a whole raft of other neurological tests, as they said, "while they had her." All these came back negative. My grandmother was in good health.

"Are you sure?" I asked the doctor when, on the final day, he delivered this report to me. "She's always forgetting things. Basic things."

"How old is she?"

"Eighty-nine."

"Exactly right. She has medium-stage dementia, which for her age, after the life she's led—it's good. It's above average."

"There's nothing she could take? She's pretty depressed."

"You live in America, is that right?" the doctor said.

I nodded.

"I know that in America they prescribe medication for this sort of thing. Maybe they're right to do so. But these are powerful drugs. They have side effects. Here we're more careful. My advice is to keep your grandmother as mentally engaged as you can. Her mem-



ory is going to disappear, but you can slow that down. And she can still enjoy her family. She can still enjoy the outdoors. These drugs can delay some of the processes, but they might break something else in her brain or body—I would avoid them." The doctor sighed. He had never said so many words to me at once, and I was surprised and grateful. "*Vot tak*," he said. So that's that. "Good luck." And he reached out his hand for me to shake.

All this for a hundred dollars.

It was time to go home. I called us a cab and went to my grandmother's room to fetch her. As I helped her up out of bed, she nearly collapsed in my arms. "She's been lying in bed for a week," the nurse who was watching us said. "It'll be a little while before she gets her strength back."

But a terrible thing had happened. Forcing an elderly woman who was used to walking several miles a day, even if only back and forth through her apartment, to lie in bed for such a long stretch of time was hugely destructive. They had meant her no harm! But my grandmother had come in with a mild head injury and she was leaving with a limp. On our way out, we bought her a cane in the hospital shop.

Gradually, things returned to normal. We hired a woman to cook for us, and my grandmother started walking through the apartment again. We settled back into our routine. We watched the nightly news together, played anagrams, and sipped tea after lunch. I felt like she had finally accepted my presence as a real and solid thing, less because of anything in particular that I did than because I was just there, day after day. When I would get dressed to go to a café or out for some groceries, she never failed to express admiration.

"Andryusha, I'm so impressed with you," she'd say. "You are so tall."

I am barely five feet seven. But my grandmother was now so tiny that I might have looked tall to her.

Occasionally, there were flashes of something else between us. Not long after my grandmother's fall, we received a rare visit from Emma Abramovna. Her son Arkady was staying with her for a few days, so she had access to a car, and she wanted to see how my grandmother was doing. My grandmother was thrilled and made elaborate preparations, including sitting me down and asking very seriously whether I thought the old bottle of red wine in the fridge, which had sat there half empty since I'd arrived, was still good enough to drink. If not, with what should we replace it? The day of the visit, my grandmother put out the plates and her best napkins and a new bottle



of wine early in the morning, and we ate breakfast in the back room, so as not to disturb them.

Finally, lunchtime arrived, and with it Emma Abramovna and Arkady. Arkady was a quiet computer programmer in his early fifties; he spent much of the visit looking at his phone. No matter: the visit was about my grandmother and Emma Abramovna. It began, as their conversations usually did, with a discussion of Emma Abramovna's children (wonderful!) and my grandmother's grandchildren (neglectful, except for me), their mutual acquaintances (mostly in Israel), and the lousy weather. Arkady and I occasionally tried to introduce fresh topics, with limited success. And then my grandmother fell into her usual post-lunch funk. "Yes," she said, "yes," and then, before I could stop her, "You see, the thing is, everyone has died. Everyone I know has died. All my relatives, all my friends. They died and left me all alone."

"Come on, Seva," Emma Abramovna said.

"But it's true!" my grandmother insisted.

"I'm still alive," Emma Abramovna said, taking the bait.

"Yes, you, O.K. But who else?"

"How should I know?" Emma Abramovna lost her temper. "I'm sure there are other people alive besides me!"

"Yes," my grandmother said, sadly. "Maybe." And, with that, her melancholy filled the room.

After Arkady took Emma Abramovna home, I couldn't help myself.

"Grandma," I said. "You so value Emma Abramovna's friendship. You were so worried about whether she'd have a good time. And then she's here and all you talk about is how lonely and depressed you are."

"So?" my grandmother said, looking up at me. "It's true, isn't it?"

"That's not the point! People don't want to hear how depressed you are! It makes them depressed!"

"You don't need to yell," she said, placed her mug of tea in the sink, and then left the kitchen. I hadn't been yelling, I didn't think. But I hadn't not been yelling, either. I watched her walk to her bedroom and close the door behind her. Why I thought I could change

my grandmother's behavior by criticizing it, I don't know. But this is what it's like to live with someone. Or, at least, this is what it's always been like for me to live with someone.

In early May, my grandmother turned ninety. She was convinced that she was turning a hundred. We had long arguments about the math. But we threw her a party. "Whose party is this?" my grandmother kept asking. "It's your party!" we would answer. "Yes?" my grandmother would say. She seemed pleased.

Now summer was around the corner, and she still had not discussed her dacha dream with Emma Abramovna. Or, rather, she had hinted at it numerous times, and Emma Abramovna had not taken her up on the hinting. Finally, I decided that I should just go over there and ask.

Emma Abramovna was an intimidating person. She had escaped from Hitler in '39, been exiled to Siberia as a Polish national, and still, more than a half century later, maintained her glamorous good looks. As she received me, half lying on her couch with a blanket draped over her lap, I knew I was coming before someone who was quite formidable, no matter her age and condition.

"So, what have you been up to in Moscow?" she said.

The honest answer was that I was playing a lot of hockey. But I had also



become increasingly involved with a small political group, which called itself October, after the October Revolution, which Yulia had introduced me to. I had become interested in its members initially as a potential subject for my long-wished-for academic article, but then I came to share their ideas, their critique of the post-Soviet predatory gangster capitalism that had dispossessed millions of people, includ-

ing my grandmother, and I had even joined up. I told Emma Abramovna some of this.

"They're, what, Communists?" she asked.

"Socialists," I said.

"Idiots!" she said. "Socialism has been tried in this country. I lived through it. And I can tell you that the only thing worse is Fascism."

"They're proposing something different," I said.

"They all propose something different, and in the end it's the same. Look at China, Cuba, Cambodia—wherever you go in the socialist world they set up camps, and sometimes worse. No, thank you."

This seemed like as good a time as any. "Emma Abramovna," I said, "as you know, Baba Seva lost her dacha in the nineties. Every summer she gets really sad when she has nowhere to go."

"I know," Emma Abramovna said. "She tells me all about it."

"Well, I was thinking. Maybe she could come stay with you at Peredelkino for a little while? It would make her summer so much better."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Emma Abramovna said right away. She did not seem in the least bit surprised by the suggestion. She had apparently not been oblivious to my grandmother's hints. She had just chosen to ignore them.

But I was surprised. "Really?" I said. I knew Emma Abramovna's social life was more varied than my grandmother's, but it didn't seem like a round-the-clock party. "Why not?" I said.

"Borya and Arkady and their families will be visiting a lot," Emma Abramovna said. "Really, there's not much space."

"There won't even be a week when you'll have room?" I asked, begging now. "You're her best friend!"

"Well," Emma Abramovna said, setting her mouth in a way that wasn't like her, but then being honest in a way that was, "she's not mine."

And then it was over. I was silent, Emma Abramovna suggested that we change the subject, and her aide, a Moldovan woman named Valya, brought out some tea and cookies. I gulped them down as quickly as I could and took my leave as politely as I could. I was

heartbroken. It was as if a door had been shut on my grandmother's life, and she didn't even know about it.

As I walked home, I called Yulia to tell her the news.

"That's very sad," she said.

"Yes," I said. "Know anyone else with a dacha?"

"Well, maybe Kolya will be done with his in time."

A friend from October, Nikolai, was in the process of building a dacha outside the city and was always trying to get people to help him. Yulia had said it half-jokingly, but it wasn't the worst idea.

"That hadn't occurred to me," I said.

"Of course, even if he does finish, there won't be much to look at," Yulia said. "And nowhere to swim."

"My grandmother's not a big swimmer these days. Do you think we can ask him?"

"I don't see why not. He can say no if he wants."

I called Nikolai. "Listen," I said, "I'm hoping to get my grandmother out of town for a week this summer, and I was wondering—could we use your dacha?"

"Of course!" he said. "I would be honored to provide shelter for a woman whose dacha was taken from her by unscrupulous capitalists." There was a pause. "But, if the place is going to be ready for the summer, I'm going to need some help."

So, for several weekends in a row, I made the long trip out and painted and sanded, and hacked through some of the overgrowth in the back yard, and helped the Uzbek construction guys unload their small trucks and set up the bathroom and the kitchen. We agreed that I could have the dacha for a week in mid-July.

In the meantime, my grandmother was growing increasingly despondent. She was shrinking physically, but her personality was shrinking as well. There was less and less of her inside her.

We could no longer watch the evening news—at some point, without any warning, she'd started having a viscerally negative reaction to the country's political leadership—and so instead in the evenings we would watch old Soviet films. Sometimes Yulia, who was our main source for tips on what



*"You didn't really think the nice people at the Rijksmuseum would give you this classy Vermeer and never collect, didja?"*

to watch, joined us. Other times, I saw her afterward. She slept over a fair amount, and my grandmother seemed to find this arrangement congenial. It was as if she were sprouting a new family.

Still, in the late-afternoon hours, after lunch, she spoke of death. "You know," she said one day, over tea, "I asked one of the pharmacists to give me poison. I even gave her the money. But now she won't do it."

"What? Who?"

"The pharmacist."

"Where?"

"Over there." She motioned outdoors. It was probably the pharmacy where she had a discount card, but who knew.

"What kind of poison?" I said.

"I asked her for something that would kill me. She said she had something like that."

I couldn't tell if this had actually happened. I imagined myself showing up at the discount pharmacy and, through the glass, demanding to know

if they had promised to poison my grandmother.

"In one of the European countries, there is a place you can go," my grandmother went on. "A house—you can go to the house, and, if you want to die, they will help you." She was talking about physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia. Perhaps she had seen a segment about it on the news. "Isn't that nice?" she went on. "If you want to go, you can go."

I no longer argued with her about these things. I agreed with her that it was nice. Sadly, I suggested, the same was not possible here.

"No," my grandmother agreed. "It's not."

Sometimes in the evenings, as she was going to bed, my grandmother asked me to sit with her. She could no longer read for long stretches of time, as she once had done, because her back hurt. She had taken to tearing out chapters of books, so that she could hold them aloft as she lay in bed, and her memory was so bad that she had trouble



enjoying anything of any length. She would lie in her little twin bed, her glasses perched on her nose, and read and reread a thin sheaf of pages, while I sat in the armchair beside her. Eventually, she would fall asleep, I would gently remove her glasses, pull her blanket over her, and turn off the light. One night that spring, after she fell asleep, I sat in my chair for a while, wondering if I should do it. My grandmother was in pain. She was bored, she felt useless, she was sad. She lay with her mouth hanging open, her teeth out, the mother of my mother, lightly snoring. She had a pillow under her knees, which I could remove without waking her and then press over her face, and perhaps if I did it gently enough she wouldn't even wake up. This was what she wanted above all—to not wake up! But of course she'd wake up if I tried to suffocate her with a pillow. I pictured her fighting, instinctively, even as, intellectually, she wanted the end to come. And then what, exactly, would I tell the police? That she had asked me to do it? I pictured a baby-faced policeman—would he be understanding? Should I try to bribe him? Or would that be an implicit admission of guilt?

It didn't matter. I wasn't going to do it. I didn't have it in me. A better person would have done it, I think.

The highlight of the summer was our trip to Nikolai's dacha. There had been some delays and cost overruns, but by mid-July it was done. Nikolai spent a week there in triumph, and then turned it over to us.

There was no way that my grandmother could take the hellish journey to the dacha on public transportation, so Yulia and I borrowed a friend's rickety old Lada. I had never driven in Moscow before, and it was terrifying. It was not just that it was a big city—it was a tremendously confusing one. The side streets were narrow, the radial avenues were enormous, and on certain long stretches the traffic lights had been eliminated, making it impossible to turn left.

Somehow, we arrived at the dacha without incident. I hadn't been there in a few weeks, and Nikolai had continued to improve it. The main thing was that he'd finished clearing out the

yard. The weeds and the overgrowth were gone, and the bushes had a bit of shape to them. My grandmother, on seeing one, immediately said, "Raspberries!" She was right. She approached it and started pulling down raspberries and eating them.

And thus we spent the week. There was a cot on the first floor where my grandmother could sleep, so she didn't have to tackle the stairs, and though the closest little grocery store was too far to walk to, we were able to drive there every morning and pick up potatoes, beets, cabbage, and bread. At Nikolai's suggestion, one day Yulia and I drove out to a village, where we went door to door buying eggs. The most eggs we could buy from any one person was two—that seemed to be all they had. But we kept going until we had twenty eggs. Neither Yulia nor I could really cook, but between the two of us, and with conceptual input from my grandmother, we were able to make enough food to keep us fed, and everyone was satisfied.

The house was in the middle of nowhere. We did not wake up to the sound of a babbling brook or the fresh smell of dewy trees and grass taking in the morning sun. But we were also not in Moscow, and that meant we were on vacation.

Yulia and I would work in the mornings, then in the afternoons we would go for a walk to an abandoned quarry nearby. My grandmother was content to sit in the back yard wearing her old wide-brimmed summer hat and occasionally getting up to feed herself raspberries from the seemingly inexhaustible bushes. One morning, Yulia and I stumbled into the kitchen to find that my grandmother was already out in the yard, picking raspberries. She had in recent weeks become almost entirely reliant on her cane when she walked, but now she was stretched out to her full height, reaching for berries. Yulia said, "She looks like a little bear."

I had brought along a whole box of old Soviet movies on DVD, and in the evenings we watched them together. We watched "Office Romance," about a mean lady boss who falls in love with her nerdy but charming underling, and "Five Evenings," a Nikita Mikhalkov film about a man who returns unexpectedly from parts unknown to spend

a week (five evenings) with his former love and her teen-age nephew, whose mother died in the war. The film is set in the mid-nineteen-fifties, and it's unclear why the man, Sasha, has been away—whether he was imprisoned, or simply left, or what. His old girlfriend, Tamara, is wary of him but not actively hostile, whereas the boy rejects him. By the end of the film, Sasha has broken down the boy's resistance somewhat, and the three of them spend some time together. Still, it is not a happy film. In the last scene, Tamara drops her skepticism toward Sasha and allows him to fall asleep with his head resting on her lap. We finally learn—and it's possible that to the Soviet audience of the time this would have been obvious from the start—the reason that the couple was separated: the war flung them to different parts of the Empire, and Sasha has only now managed to make it back. As he falls asleep on her lap, Tamara, beginning to plan her future with him again, pronounces a kind of prayer. "Just don't let there be another war," she says. "Just don't let there be another war."

"Yes," my grandmother said when the film ended. "Just don't let there be another war."

The phrase, which during Soviet times had become a kind of slogan, contained so much. Her husband, my grandfather, dying at the front; her parents, forced to evacuate Moscow despite her father's poor health; in the midst of all this, her pregnancy and the birth of my mother. Just don't let there be another war: a mixture of terror and hope.

We were sitting next to each other on the couch that became her cot at night. If my grandfather had survived the war, my grandmother could have had other children. Or if she'd remarried sooner than she did. If she'd had other children, they could have been here for her now, and she would have had more grandchildren, probably, than just me and Dima.

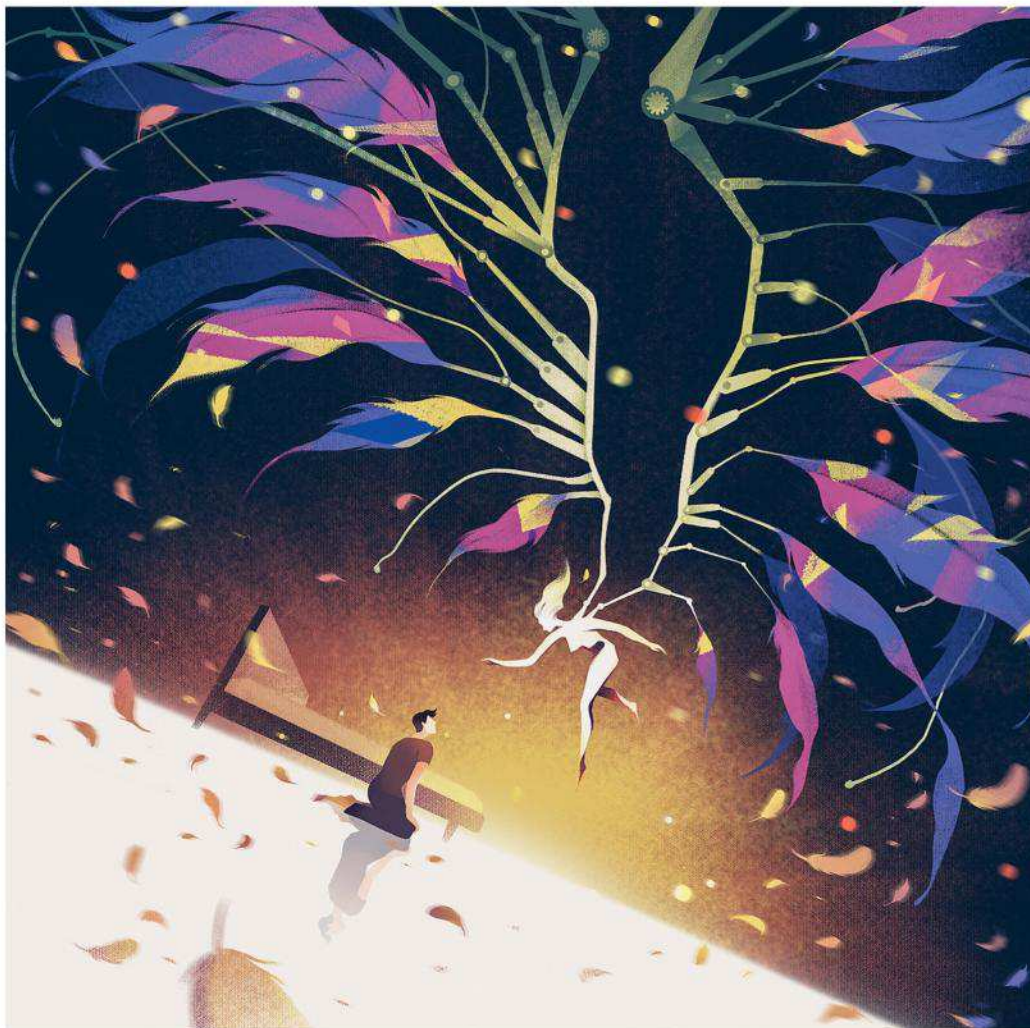
"But you don't get to say how your life is going to be," my grandmother said suddenly. And that was also true. On a whim, I took her hand in mine. For such a tiny little grandmother, she had surprisingly big hands. ♦

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Keith Gessen on family and a changing Russia.

# THE CRITICS



THE THEATRE

## REQUIRED READING

*The brilliant, maddening, and necessary “Angels in America.”*

BY HILTON ALS

**I**t has taken me years to understand that, while I don't necessarily identify with a number of the characters in “Angels in America,” Tony Kushner's brilliant, maddening, and necessary masterpiece (now in revival at the Neil Simon, under the direction of Marianne Elliott), I do have deep feelings about the Angel. Not the one at Bethesda Fountain, in Central Park, who watches over some of the story's action, but the Angel who

speaks. She's played in the current production by the nimble and intelligent Amanda Lawrence; our initial view of her is at the end of “Millennium Approaches,” the first part of the nearly eight-hour, two-part play. (The second is titled “Perestroika.”) We're in the Manhattan apartment of a young man named Prior Walter (Andrew Garfield). It's 1985, and Prior, the descendant of a distinguished American family, has AIDS. He's

just thirty, and when he got sick—when the lesions began to show and he was bleeding and had difficulty walking—his overly verbal, politically but not personally committed lover, Louis Ironson (James McArdle), left him, unable to deal with the presumed inevitable.

Fear defined the times. Ronald Reagan was President; the Christian right, including the political-action group the Moral Majority, had helped get him

*Part winged creature and part radiant hag, the Angel looks like a creation of the illustrator Edward Gorey.*



there. The AIDS crisis had laid waste to thousands of people, but Reagan had never talked publicly about the disease. (That didn't happen until 1987.) Prior is at home, humiliated by loneliness and his body's slow failure, when he begins to experience some strange things—especially for an ailing man. A powerful erection, for one.

Added to that personal weirdness, two chatty ectoplasms he's somehow related to come to visit. First, there's Prior 1, a thirteenth-century figure who carries a scythe. He reveals that he, too, was a victim of "the pestilence." In some of Kushner's most vivid, beautiful language, Prior 1 recalls, "You could look outdoors and see Death walking in the morning, dew dampening the ragged hem of his black robe."

But Prior 2 won't be outdone. A seventeenth-century Londoner dressed in period costume, Prior 2 speaks about death in a plummy accent. During his lifetime, there was, for instance, Black Jack. "Came from a water pump," Prior 2 says. "Half the city of London—can you imagine?" (Prior 1 is played by Lee Pace and Prior 2 by Nathan Lane. Both have other roles.)

The youngest Prior wants to know whether he's going to die. The older Priors can't answer that. Prior 2: "We've been sent to declare Her fabulous incipience. They love a well-paved entrance with lots of heralds." The ghostly Priors vanish, and in comes the Angel. And she is fabulous. Part winged creature and part radiant hag, she has eyes that focus intently on Prior, along with eight vaginas that excite the object of her interest. With her wild gray hair and a long, slim body covered in a sooty bodysuit, the Angel looks like a refugee from an old, crumbling discothèque, or like a creation of the illustrator Edward Gorey. (Elliott, who has won two Tonys for Best Director—in 2011, for "War Horse," and in 2015, for "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time"—is especially adept at stage choreography.)

The Angel tells Prior, "The Great Work begins." What does she want from Prior? She wants him to speak. To speak is to live. I have seen a number of productions of "Angels in America," including Ivo van Hove's outstanding, pared-down version, from 2014, but the Angel's arrival and command never fail

to tear my heart out. The Angel asks Prior to begin his work—their work—by prophesying. Silence and hesitance equal death. Isn't that what we wanted for our gone friends? To be the messenger for all we wished they could say?

"Angels in America" is filled with wishes, hope, rabbinical anger, fantasy—and the kinds of errors in characterization that are bound to happen when big ideas come fast and furious, and authentic characters with beautifully confused intentions serve or get run over by those ideas. (I suggest reading the play before you see this or any production, to absorb Kushner's bravura language, which can sometimes get a little lost in all the action.)

But that's O.K., because just when you think Kushner is losing sight of how to handle the seven primary characters—eight, if you count the Angel—he brings out a new and hitherto unexplored empathy for a family that is not biological, let alone chosen. Roy Cohn (Lane) is diagnosed as having AIDS at the same time that Prior is—but that's a matter of opinion, according to Cohn. If his doctor, Henry (Susan Brown), announces that diagnosis, the hateful, litigious Cohn—who made sure that Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were killed in the electric chair; served as Joseph McCarthy's chief counsel during his crusade against Communism; and, toward the end of his life, represented Donald Trump—will destroy Henry's career. The truth is open to debate. Cohn says that he has liver cancer, and Henry follows suit.

Still, there is something like love in Cohn's closeted life. He has a protégé named Joe Pitt (Pace), who has lots of ambition but no direction—just Cohn's kind of guy. He'll get Joe to Congress, but in return for what? Not realizing that Cohn is gay, Joe can't tell him—can't tell anyone—that he's gay himself; after all, he's a Mormon, and married. At night, he goes for walks in the Ramble, in Central Park (where the angel at Bethesda looks after us all), to observe men who are in touch with their bodies. When he meets the guilt-ridden Louis, they're bound by their failure to be honest men. Like most of the characters, except Cohn, Joe and Louis want to be free in themselves, to have their bodies without apology and threat of death or loss. There's an extraordinary moment when, at the beach—it's winter—Joe strips out of his

Mormon undergarments, as a way of showing that he wants to have no restrictions between him and Louis.

Louis is frightened of love, too: he perceives it as a responsibility, not as a freeing agent. But who, during that time, could separate his love for a man from how he'd care for him if the worst happened?

**B**elize (Nathan Stewart-Jarrett), a black nurse who works on the AIDS ward in a Manhattan hospital, sees the worst and tries his best to combat it. With his peroxided hair and purposeful stride, he's the only character in the piece who deals with realism on a daily basis. When Cohn is put on his floor, Belize knows exactly who he is; he takes the AZT—at the time, a rare and valuable drug—that Cohn has stockpiled, and gives it to the needy, including his closest friend and former lover, Prior.

There are no corny or soap-opera-ish coincidences in Kushner's work, really; one of the points he's trying to make is that we are all deeply connected, simply by being active spirits in the same cosmos, and by being closeted and not-closeted gay men. Sexuality dictates and shapes its own culture. Still, despite Belize's virtues, I have never felt comfortable in his presence. Even the greatest actor would love to do all the finger-snapping part-time-drag-queen stuff, but I don't know one black man in nineteen-eighties New York who would have felt entirely himself—entirely safe—"reading" white people while on the job. The character is a dream of black strength, an Angela Bassett of the ward.

Similarly, Louis has always got on my nerves. Kushner has poured a lifetime of feeling and thought about Jewish intellectual skepticism into him. He's a guilty person who fucks up so that he can feel guilty. (Belize: "It's no fun picking on you, Louis. . . . There's no satisfying hits, just quivering, the darts just blop in and vanish.") So, when he learns that Joe worked with Cohn, he doesn't so much evolve as get woke. When Louis confronts Joe, Pace is so sweet in his confusion that you want to scoop up his tall frame and banish all the terrible things in his life.

Elliott does nothing to tone down the butch-femme dichotomy in the work. While the more "flamboyant" characters Prior and Belize suffer and are intuitive, butch trade like Joe are all

about outward strength and quiet intensity. Just as I don't believe Belize, Andrew Garfield, too cut to be dying of AIDS, engages too much in the limp-wristed school of acting—lots of squealing and literal limp wrists. (Lane plays Lane playing Roy Cohn.) Garfield is a good actor, and, God knows, it's a part that could kill a less aware star, but flouncing around doesn't make you gay; it makes you a well-toned actor trying to play an AIDS victim.

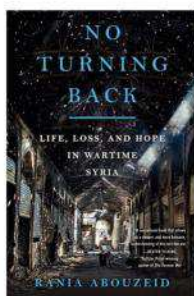
When I saw "Millennium Approaches," audience members laughed when Prior first collapsed, bleeding. I was furious, and then saddened when I realized that many of them were too young to know how AIDS decimated not only a community but the world. They took the scene as another example of Garfield's amusing overacting. "Angels in America" premiered twenty-seven years ago, a decade after the AIDS crisis began, and, each time it's performed, there's another generation of audience members who can't understand the love and the urgency that the play grew out of.

But back to the Angel. She makes love to Prior, briefly, in "Perestroika," a scene that put me in mind of the poet James Merrill. In his outstanding trilogy "The Changing Light at Sandover," there's an angel, Michael, who visits Merrill and his partner, David Jackson, at the close of Volume II, "Mirabell: Books of Number" (1978). Like Kushner's Angel, Merrill's feels at one with the protagonists. They are gay men who commune with the spirit world in order to escape, in part, this world, with its fag-bashing and internalized self-hatred. Merrill's angel is a kind of guide out of that purgatory and into a more cohesive understanding of the world of bodies. Michael says:

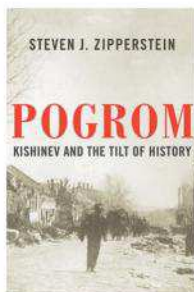
WE HAVE IN THIS MEETING FOUND YOU  
INTELLIGENT & YOUR SERIOUS NATURES  
AT ONE WITH US. . . .  
I HAVE ESTABLISHED YOUR ACQUAINTANCE  
& ACCEPT YOU. COME NEXT TIME IN YOUR  
OWN MANNER. SERVANTS WE ARE NOT.

Michael wants the queer men he loves to rise up and to take their place, not only in the Heaven that awaits them but in the Hell we've made through ignorance, fear, and willfulness. I don't know if Merrill had any influence on Kushner, but, as Kushner's Angel is for Prior, Merrill's was among the first to empower my dead and living kind. ♦

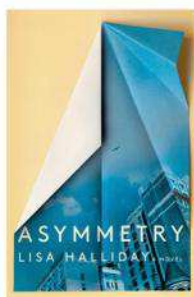
## BRIEFLY NOTED



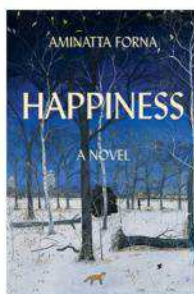
**No Turning Back**, by Rania Abouzeid (Norton). This unparalleled account of the Syrian uprising, drawing on six years of immersive reporting, is about lives shaped by a confrontation that was "existential—for all sides—from its inception." Abouzeid profiles a Sufi poet who took up arms, a privileged man who documented protests and later the torture he suffered in jails, an Islamist who smuggled in foreign fighters, and a girl who assumed adult responsibilities when her family became exiles. The book chronicles the ingenuity of those who've persisted under barrel bombs, the vulnerability of those who transgress borders, and the splintering of the rebellion amid disparate visions for Syria's future.



**Pogrom**, by Steven J. Zipperstein (Liveright). The methodical slaughter of forty-nine Jews on the streets of Kishinev, the capital of Moldova, over the course of three days in April, 1903, was a pivotal event in the history of modern anti-Semitism, the rise of Zionism, and, as a symbol of racist violence, a catalyst for the rise of the N.A.A.C.P. With extraordinary scholarly energy, Zipperstein uncovers sources in Russian, Yiddish, and English that show not only why this bloody event ignited the Jewish imagination, its sense of embattlement in exile, but also why it had such lasting resonance internationally. It prompted landmark journalism, vivid Hebrew poetry, and the notorious forgery the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a seminal piece of anti-Semitic propaganda.



**Asymmetry**, by Lisa Halliday (Simon & Schuster). This exceptional debut novel juxtaposes two seemingly unrelated narratives set in the mid-aughts. In the first, a young publishing assistant in New York dates an aging writer, bonding with him over literature, music, and baseball. In the second, an Iraqi-American economics Ph.D. reflects on his country's turbulent history while he's detained by immigration officials at Heathrow Airport. The literal connection between the two stories is revealed, almost in passing, in a brief epilogue. The thematic links, however, resonate throughout, as the book contemplates "the extent to which we're able to penetrate the looking-glass and imagine a life, indeed a consciousness, that goes some way to reduce the blind spots in our own."



**Happiness**, by Aminatta Forna (Atlantic Monthly). In this gentle, sprawling novel, Jean, a divorced biologist from Massachusetts, has recently moved to London, and lives a solitary life communing with nature—tracking the foxes she went there to study, jogging through an overgrown cemetery, planting a meadow on her rooftop. Then she meets Attila, a Ghanaian P.T.S.D. specialist whose wife died five years ago. Attila is similarly isolated, immersing himself in music and work. As he and Jean find themselves drawn into a web of relationships—with a young boy separated from his mother, with an old flame of Attila's, and with each other—they come to a new understanding of the role that personal connection, as well as suffering, plays in the human experience.



## UPON THIS ROCK

*Ross Douthat ponders a possible schism in the Catholic Church.*

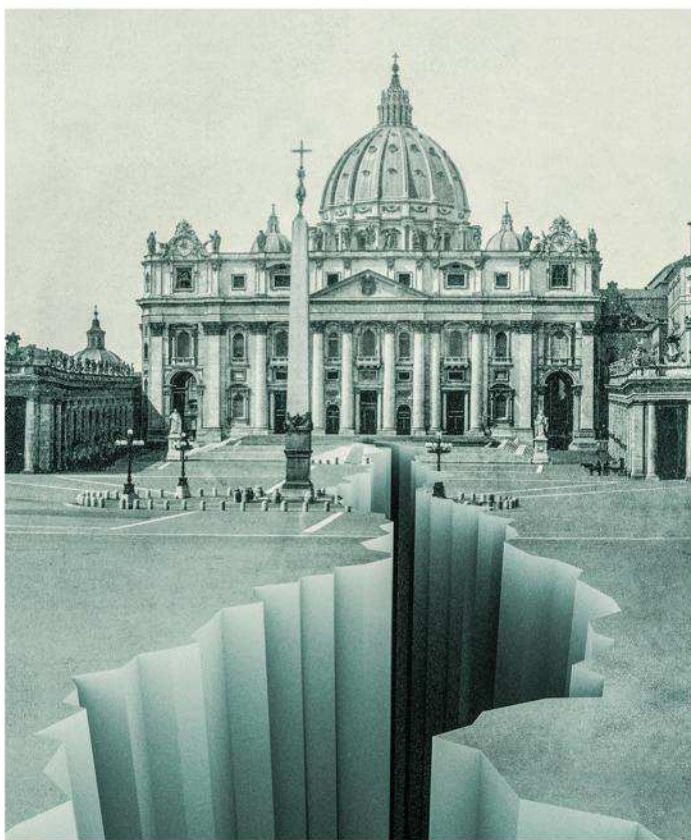
BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM

For the better part of the past two years, Catholics around the world have been fighting over a footnote. In April, 2016, Pope Francis, after leading two synods devoted to “the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and in the contemporary world,” published a teaching document titled “*Amoris Laetitia*,” or “The Joy of Love.” Tucked away in the eighth chapter of the text is footnote 351, which corresponds to an anodyne-sounding sentence about the extent to which “mitigating factors” might affect a pastor’s handling of certain personal predicaments—such as divorce, followed by remarriage—that are considered sinful. Catholics who find themselves in such situations, the footnote explains, might be helped along by the very sacraments that their transgressions would typically bar them from receiving. Communion “is not a prize for the perfect,” Francis writes, “but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.”

For Pope Francis’s progressive supporters, this was the latest sign of a pastoral tendency toward inclusiveness and mercy. For his more traditionalist critics, it was a direct threat to the Catholic injunction against divorce, about which Jesus was brutally clear, in the Book of Matthew: “Whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful), and marries another, commits adultery.” Catholic doctrine holds that marriage is an “indissoluble” ontological state, and that, for this reason, Communion is not extended to those who violate it. A few weeks after the release of “*Amoris Laetitia*,” the German Catholic phi-

losopher Robert Spaemann said in an interview that footnote 351 could lead to “a schism that would not be settled on the peripheries, but rather in the heart of the Church.” He added, “May God forbid that from happening.”

Spaemann, a professor emeritus at the University of Munich, has close ties



to Francis’s predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI. Benedict, born Joseph Ratzinger, was himself a German academic, and is the author of notable works of scholarship, including the 1968 book “Introduction to Christianity,” a much heralded explication of the faith. In 1977, Ratzinger became the archbishop of Munich and Freising, and then, in 1981, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which, once upon a time, was called the Inquisition. As prefect, he served Pope John Paul II as a kind of theologian-

in-chief, and was known, on occasion, to gently correct even the Pontiff. Ratzinger was elected Pope, in 2005, after the death of John Paul, but continued to devote himself to scholarship; in addition to the sermons and encyclicals that are the ordinary literary duty of that office, he found time to compose and publish “Jesus of Nazareth,” a three-volume work on the life of Christ. He was not a popularizer of the faith, as John Paul was, or as Francis would become; he was a writer. And he became, over time, a living metaphor for the way in which an emphasis on a religion’s textual dimensions can act both as an agent of clarity and as a bulwark against change.

Then, in 2013, Benedict committed one of the more radical acts in recent Catholic history: he resigned. The last voluntary papal resignation had occurred in 1294, soon after the hermit Pietro Angelerio was made Pope Celestine V, as a sort of cosmic joke. Angelerio had written angrily to an assembly of cardinals, in the midst of a two-year impasse in naming a new Pope, warning them that they would incur God’s wrath if it lasted any longer. The cardinals’ response was to drag the monk out of seclusion and fit him for white robes. He stayed in office just long enough to declare the Pope’s right to abdicate and to avail himself of that option. Dante is said to have written Celestine into the *Inferno*; according to this theory, he’s the anonymous figure

in Hell’s antechamber “who due to cowardice made the great refusal.” No new Pope has named himself Celestine in the centuries since. He hardly offered a sparkling precedent for Benedict’s decision.

Francis’s tenure has made clearer every day that the resignation would mean a departure from at least the recent past. Francis, who is eighty-one, recently celebrated the fifth anniversary of his ascension to the office, but he still seems fundamentally new. After the

conclave that culminated in his election, on the way to his inaugural Mass at the Sistine Chapel, he made sure to be photographed handling his own baggage, looking more like a tourist or a pilgrim than a Pontiff. He opted for simple black shoes, in pointed contrast to Benedict's red leather numbers. Even his chosen name—he's the first Pope to name himself Francis, after St. Francis of Assisi, and the first Pope in more than a millennium to choose a name that had not been chosen before—hinted at a radical simplicity. He has not written the sort of scholarly tracts for which Benedict will be remembered, but he has produced "Happiness in This Life" (Random House), a collection of peppy one-liners, almost self-helpish in tone, culled from his encyclicals and sermons. "There is one word that I want to say to you: *joy!*" Francis declares. "Never be sad, men and women: A Christian should never be sad! Never let yourself be discouraged!"

Francis seems less intent on altering the Church's most controversial doctrines than on exhibiting boredom with the whole angst-ridden discourse that surrounds them. When he was asked about footnote 351, shortly after "Amoris Laetitia" was published, he said that he couldn't remember it. Earlier in his papacy, while fielding questions from the Vatican press corps on a plane, he was asked about the Church's stance on homosexuality. He replied, "Who am I to judge?" It sounded more like a plea to move past the issue than like an actual invocation of humility. (After all, when it comes to society's market-driven indifference to the poor, or even to Francis's pet theological causes, such as devotion to the Virgin Mary, he is not shy about offering judgments.) Francis quickly became popular in the press, and among liberal non-Catholics. After the worst years of the clerical-abuse crisis in the Church, here was a leader who embodied Catholicism's lastingly positive, if comparatively abstract, associations. (Few of us imagine ourselves as opposed to love, mercy, and human dignity.) He sounded willing, even eager, to leave the less comfortable conversations—about divorce, contraception, homosexuality—behind.

But the appeal of the institution of the Papacy, for many, lies in its prom-

ise of constancy. According to Catholic teaching, the office was created when Christ named the apostle Peter the first leader of the Church, saying, in a pun on the Greek meaning of Peter's name, "Upon this rock will I build my church." The more impressive the edifice you'd like to build, the more important a stable base becomes. Today, under Francis, and in the wake of Benedict's resignation—he is now Pope Emeritus, a title that has never existed before—the Papacy has become the site for unexpected shifts and discontinuities. Hence, in part, the fierce reactions of Francis's critics, some of whom, like Spaemann, have come to understand the clash over "Amoris" as a crisis. In becoming implicitly more amenable to divorce—and, by extension, to other ills of the wider culture—the Church, they worry, might cease, permanently, in any recognizable way, to be itself.

This unsettling state of affairs is the subject of "To Change the Church: Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism" (Simon & Schuster), a new book by the conservative *Times* columnist Ross Douthat. As the controversy over "Amoris Laetitia" has grown, the thirty-eight-year-old Douthat has become perhaps the most prominent lay critic of Francis's papacy. In that unofficial capacity, he has duelled in print, in public conversations, and, often, on Twitter, with many of Francis's defenders, including Antonio Spadaro, an Italian Jesuit priest and journalist who is thought to be one of the Pope's closest confidants outside the Vatican. Almost uniquely among mainstream commentators, Douthat has been willing to suggest the possibility that Francis will spark a genuine schism between liberals and conservatives. His previous book, on the quirky diversity—and, in his view, the errancy—of Christianity in America, is titled "Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics." In "To Change the Church," one sometimes senses a barely constrained wish to apply the H-word to Francis himself—a wish suppressed only, perhaps, by a last shred or two of institutional deference.

The book opens, oddly, with an extended meditation on Douthat's own religious history and on the mixture of sensibilities that, he admits, might color,

or even compromise, his assessment of "Amoris" and the Pope. Douthat was born into Protestantism, wobbling along the seldom-travelled border between Pentecostal fire and the polite mainstream. He converted to Catholicism as a teen-ager, freely but under the influence of his spiritually itinerant mother. "So in the world of cradle Catholics and adult converts, groups that are often contrasted with one another and occasionally find themselves at odds, I belong to the little-known third category in between," he explains. He casts his life as a Christian as similarly divided—often doubtful and ironic where others seem, to him, naturally pious and enviably prone to untroubled belief. "Sometimes I felt as though my conversion was incomplete, awaiting some further grace or transformation," he writes. "At others I felt that I belonged to a category of Catholics that used to be common in Catholic novels... the good bad Catholic or the bad good one, whose loyalty was stronger than his faith and whose faith was stronger than his practice, but who didn't want the church to change all the rules to make his practice easier because then what would really be the point?"

The story of Francis's papacy is in part a regional story: prelates from wealthier European countries, where ancient cathedrals increasingly sit empty, have, in their eagerness to encourage congregants to return, been more likely to support the liberal interpretations of "Amoris." Meanwhile, representatives of the newly dynamic Church in the global South—especially Africa, where Catholicism is in a pitched battle with charismatic and, often, prosperity-promising denominations—have hewed to traditionalism. (The German Benedict and the Latin-American Francis occupy ironic positions in this divide; Benedict is something of an anomaly among his countrymen, and the brashness of Francis, the Argentine son of Italian immigrants, may stem in part from his upbringing in a place in which, at the time, Catholicism still amounted to a total culture.) Douthat notes these divisions, but refrains, amid his other confessions, from turning the geographic mirror on himself. The American Church is proportionally smaller, and more embattled, than many of its counterparts elsewhere; for years, immigration has been its sole source of



consistent growth. And our country's rapidly fragmenting political and cultural landscape casts frightening shadows when held up against a Church that continues its choppy engagement with an increasingly irreligious West.

At first blush, the Church might appear to be as plagued by splintering as so much of American life is: besides the rough liberal-conservative divide that, in its current form, has persisted since the sixties, there are also Catholic socialists, Catholic Trumpists, liberation theologians, liturgical traditionalists lamenting the loss of the old Latin Mass, and ultramontane restorationists who hint at their hopes for a return to theocracy—and who, by implication, dismiss both liberals and conservatives as modernists who have been led astray by pluralistic democracy, and by the false hope of convergence with the wider world.

But these factions are, ideally, united by a sense of eschatology via history: a hope that they are all journeying, however imperfectly, together, toward God. These days, this would seem to constitute a major point of attraction, especially to a certain kind of politically interested American spiritual seeker. In the secular realm, we carry out our arguments—and develop our politics, each of us an autodidact—without the benefit of a common moral language or the bedrock of shared premises, and we sometimes appear fated, therefore, to retreat to our various ideological corners for good. The Catholicism of a figure like Benedict, with his faith in the legibility of earthly and spiritual experience, presents a salve for this condition. Its adherents might squabble, but their differ-

ences lead them back, eventually, to a mutual inheritance: the words of Jesus in the Gospels, the lives of the saints, the rhythms of the liturgy, the catechism of the Church. This common ground might not prompt agreement, but it can result in understanding, and in something like harmony. One of my favorite genres of Catholic literature is the book-length interview: the Pope or some other high-ranking churchman sits down with a reporter or other layman, both operating on the assumption that conversation tends toward truth. (Francis has participated in more than one of these books; the most recent was just published in Italy, under the title “God Is Young.”)

In his most effective columns for the *Times*, Douthat, a staunch social conservative who nonetheless manages to project a tone of Gen X knowingness and mild ennui, is not so much an ideological champion or purveyor of contrarian opinion as a cunning interpreter. As the *Times*' Op-Ed section has become the subject of internecine media controversy, largely over the quality and the usefulness of its conservative contributorship, Douthat stands as the cleverest and least predictable writer there. He means to persuade—or, at least, to subtly reroute the grooves of reasoning by which his wary readers arrive at their reliably liberal positions. But he usually tries to do so by breezing past the most radical implications of his ideas. In one recent column, he offered a rationale for why liberals should welcome a nativist like the White House policy staffer and speechwriter Stephen Miller at the table of the immigration debate, presenting several benign-sounding arguments for

Miller's pretty gross position on the subject without ever letting slip whether he shares it.

He isn't so coy in “To Change the Church”—the sincerity of his alarm with respect to Francis won't allow it. But the book's best chapters are vehicles for his genuine understanding of more liberal co-religionists, and for his ability to parrot their most compelling arguments, skewing them nearly imperceptibly on the way to chopping them down. One of his signature rhetorical maneuvers is to render, in as plain and unmocking a manner as possible, two partisan stories about—or, as the liberal slur goes, “both sides” of—a given phenomenon or event, and then to clear a path through the middle, revealing the gulf between them to be the result of virtually irreconcilable patterns of thought. In one impressive and quietly comic section of “To Change the Church,” he recounts the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council three times, from three points of view, setting exaggerated tribal grievances next to details of undeniable truth, as if slowly turning over events in order to find an acceptably clean ground for conversation.

His third version of the Vatican II story, the one he considers to be closest to the truth, presents a dialectic. The council, which took place from 1962 to 1965, produced, under the guidance of, first, Pope John XXIII, and then Pope Paul VI, a new framework for Catholic engagement with modernity. Amity between the Church and other denominations, as well as non-Christian religions, was encouraged; the legacy of Catholic anti-Semitism was roundly denounced; it became licit, for the first time, to celebrate the liturgy in vernacular languages, instead of in Latin. Suddenly—according to liberals, who regard John XXIII as a hero—the doors of the Church were open as never before. But John Paul II and Benedict sought to dispel any notion of an ecclesial revolution, and, during their papacies, conservative Catholics largely accepted their argument that Vatican II was completely compatible with the doctrinal dispensations that had preceded it. Progressives retreated, hoping for a liberal Pontiff to arrive soon and revive the world-embracing Vatican II spirit.

The fear that Douthat expresses in



*“I can tell when you’re just kissing me to get some of my lip balm, Josh.”*

“To Change the Church” is that Francis’s foray into theological innovation with “Amoris” threatens to drag these unresolved tensions into the light—and, perhaps, to aggravate them beyond repair. The book is characteristically well written, and makes impressive use of theological crises from centuries past in order to contextualize Francis in the long, often fractious sweep of Catholic history. But at Douthat’s moments of greatest alarm, he seems determined to set aside the surprises, the reversals, and the lingering irresolution that one finds in that history. Francis, he complains throughout the book, is too often ambiguous; Douthat believes that the ambiguity is strategic, a way to mask a subterranean desire to change Catholicism for good. In the Church’s past, however, uncertainty has sometimes been the rule for decades, even centuries, before its ancient teachings have groped their way into coherence with the cultures and the times at hand. Francis appears cognizant that his turn at the helm comes at such a tenuous moment—the abuse scandal and Benedict’s resignation insured as much—and he appears determined to keep his balance for as long as tension persists.

In his position at the *Times*, Douthat is an essentially, if covertly, evangelistic writer, and he is most convincing when his tone is irenic, funny, and self-deprecating, and when he is willing to trade small, stubborn differences for broader agreements—when, in other words, he most closely resembles Francis. Both hope to win a soul or two, and both come across as willing, given their surroundings, to make a few compromises in the winning. Sounding briefly Benedictine in the preface, Douthat says that his book “is conservative, in the sense that it assumes the church needs a settled core of doctrine, a clear unbroken link to the New Testament and the early church, for Catholicism’s claims and structure and demands to make any sense at all.” But Douthat’s proposed solutions to the crisis, like his historical analyses and his disposition, are more pragmatic than truly traditionalist. He suggests more than once, for instance, that the worldwide Church might perhaps follow the American Church’s lead in widening access to annulments and in speeding up the process for obtaining them.

The functional reality would be roughly the same as that expressed by the new Franciscan paradigm—people moving from one set of marriage vows to another, receiving Communion at both the start and the end of the journey—but the surrounding forms would be stable enough to claim continuity. Douthat often sounds like a symptom of the dissonances that Francis seeks to resolve.

In February, Benedict, who will soon turn ninety-one, wrote to the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, announcing that he was on a “pilgrimage towards Home.” The impression of Benedict as a scholar-ascetic, hunched over a stack of papers, writing or reading or lost in a moment of prayer, has deepened during the five years since his abdication of the Petrine throne and his scrupulously kept vow to allow his successor to rule without fear of contradiction. In March, the Vatican published an eleven-book series, by eleven different authors, titled “The Theology of Pope Francis,” and its head of communications, Monsignor Dario Viganò, revealed, at a press conference, that he had asked Benedict to offer his thoughts, in the form of “a page or a page and a half of dense theology in his clear and punctual style.” Benedict declined, writing a short letter, a photograph of which Viganò presented to the public—a page of type, under Benedict’s terse letterhead: “Benedict XVI, Papa emeritus.” In the picture, only one paragraph is legible; it contains a rebuke to those who place stock in the opposing caricatures of the two Popes—Benedict as cloistered academic and Francis as untutored operator—and insists on a deeper “interior continuity” between their papacies.

Benedict is surely right to push back against those depictions. For all Francis’s facility with symbols and grand gestures, he has not instituted a break from Church teaching but, rather, a shift in focus from text to practice, from household rules to daily life. He is not, as some of his most strident critics have implied, indifferent to doctrine; it is more that his emphases, and his cryptic silences, have helped coax into view an ideal long cherished by liberal—and, often, lapsed—Catholics: a Church whose appeal lies in its engagement with, and not its retreat from, the wider world. It is unclear whether Francis sees himself in this light. Some-

times he seems to be a figure of convenience for political and cultural élites who have tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to marshal his universalist message against the recent global upswing of nativist-nationalist political sentiment—while, at the same time, and mostly successfully, resisting or ignoring his critiques of modern technology and economics.

The Vatican presented Benedict’s letter as an endorsement of Francis, delivered at a moment of growing conservative criticism, but it soon became clear that something was amiss. Reporters from the Associated Press noticed that the bottom two lines on the page in the photograph were slightly blurred, and that the entire second page of the letter was nowhere to be seen. After an outcry from the media and from members of the Church, the rest of the text, in Italian, was released. Benedict’s diplomacy, it turned out, wasn’t so complete. He had expressed disappointment at the inclusion in the series of a theologian who had previously directed “anti-papist” attacks at him, and he revealed that he hadn’t read the books at all. Amid the ensuing rancor over the deception, Viganò resigned.

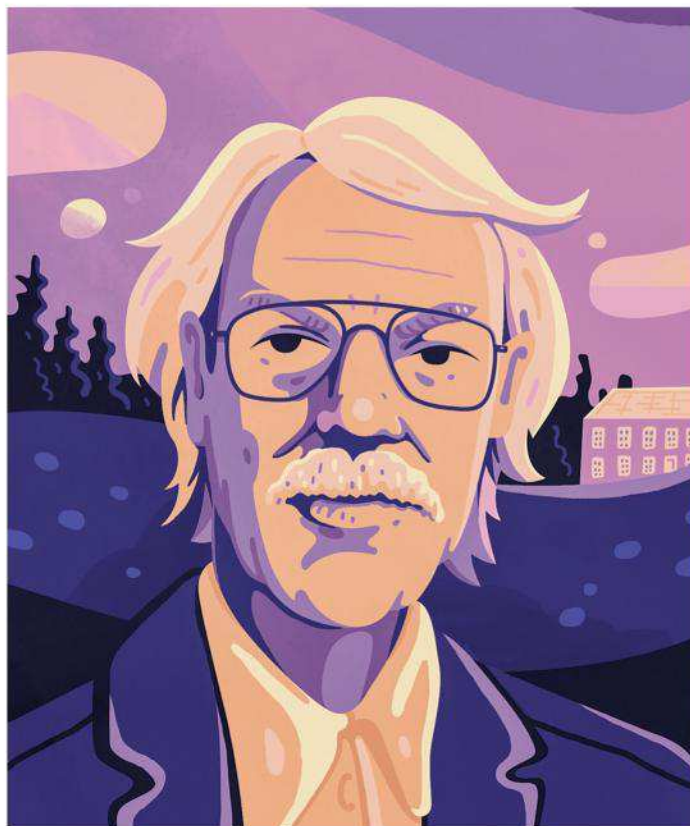
The episode, almost slapstick in its clumsiness, evoked the persistent, if mostly marginal, murmurings of some reactionaries that Benedict remains the true Pope, having been manipulated into resigning by a corrupt—and, in the most conspiratorial accounts, largely gay—Vatican bureaucracy that was fed up with his fealty to doctrine. The truth, by most reasonable tellings, is less sensational: Benedict was at John Paul II’s side as he slid into helplessness in the years before his death, and saw the disorientation that a dying Pope could sow among his flock. The Church is still foundering from the sexual-abuse crisis, and, in his final years, Benedict didn’t trust himself to steer the faithful past the shoals. Francis has not inspired much more confidence on that score: he has tended to be dismissive of, and sometimes even hostile toward, the critics of bishops and other prelates who enabled decades of wicked behavior. The problem of priestly abuse might indeed be the sturdiest link between Francis and Benedict—and a lingering reminder that what has most grievously afflicted the Church in recent decades came not from the outer world, but from within. ♦



## LONG ROAD AHEAD

*Walter Kempowski's epic novel of Germany in collapse.*

BY JAMES WOOD



Imagine, for a moment, a German novel about the final months of the Second World War, an epic tale of national collapse and shameful private defeat, the ruined landscape ribboned with refugees. Now imagine such a book written by a German who lived through those bitter months as a teen-ager, but written with a light touch, almost quizzically, the entire story suffused with an air of speculative detachment. I wouldn't have thought it could be done. Then I encountered Walter Kempowski's extraordinary novel "All for Nothing" (New York Review Books), first published in German in 2006, and now available in Anthea Bell's vital translation.

That light touch is evident from the beginning. An opening paragraph sets a leisurely scene, like something out of

Fontane or Turgenev: "The Georgenhof estate was not far from Mitkau, a small town in East Prussia, and now, in winter, the Georgenhof, surrounded by old oaks, lay in the landscape like a black island in a white sea." It is January, 1945. We think we know how this confident narrative will proceed, in ample furlongs of classic realism: the imperilled gentry, the advancing Red Army, the wintry trek westward. Kempowski's novel does contain those elements, but the anticipated stability of the storytelling is impishly subverted on the first page, when the author switches from his description of the house to the people who pass it on the road:

All that strangers driving along the road saw of the place was the main house. They wondered who lived there: why don't we just stop

and say hello? And then with a touch of envy they wondered: why don't we live in a house like that ourselves, a place that must be full of stories? Life is unfair, thought the passers-by.

NO THROUGH ROAD, said a notice on the big barn: no one was allowed to go into the park. Peace reigned behind the house and in the little park and the wood beyond it. There has to be a place where you feel you belong.

The simplicity—"why don't we just stop and say hello?"—is disarming, and also feels a bit dangerous, like a child's interrogative curiosity. Then there's the question of perspective, and its ironies. Kempowski's prose has quickly moved from the house to those people who cannot gain access to it. But are these outsiders the implied speakers of "There has to be a place where you feel you belong," or might this truism just as easily have been voiced by the Georgenhof's owners? Since we can't really decide who is speaking, we also feel the presence of an implied third speaker—the author, ambiguous, watchful, wry.

There is intense foreboding everywhere, and little resembling peace reigns inside or outside the Georgenhof. We are in East Prussia (an area that is now mostly in Poland); the victorious and understandably vengeful Russian Army is expected at any moment from the eastern border. Better to be captured by the Americans, one character says, than to "fall into the hands of those subhuman Russians." Later, someone else nervously asks: But didn't the Russians behave quite well at the end of the First World War? Bombs fall, not far away, on the Mitkau railway station. Tanks and trucks rumble past the big house. The Georgenhof's matriarch thinks that their old world now resembles a refrain from that Hans Christian Andersen story: "Oh my dearest Augustin, all's gone, gone, gone." For German civilians, there are, or soon will be, two unpleasantly overlapping options: surrender here to the invading forces, or journey westward toward the Reich, and surrender there. "There has to be a place where you feel you belong," but outside the Georgenhof the catastrophe of homelessness has been set in motion, as ordinary Germans begin the westward exodus, while, inside the big house, bags are already packed, and preparations to leave are being discussed. Should the family join relatives in Berlin, or Uncle Josef in Albertsdorf?

In the book's opening chapters, at

*In "All for Nothing," moral imperatives are never free of ignoble interests.*

least, life inside the Georgenhof retains many of its customary rhythms. Kempowski patiently introduces us to a privileged, insulated, and politically apathetic world. History will infect this family like a virus, but it is a slow-incubating one. When the air-raid siren sounds over Mitkau, the owners of the Georgenhof never react: "What were they supposed to do? . . . Run into the woods? Yes, but not every night." The Georgenhof has been inhabited since before the First World War by the Globig family, recently ennobled gentry. The patriarch, Eberhard von Globig, is serving in Italy, an officer in charge of supplies. Left in the house are his beautiful, languorous, and withdrawn wife, Katharina, and their fair-haired, inquisitive twelve-year-old son, Peter. Katharina spends much of her time in what is known as the refuge, a private apartment in the mansion where she smokes, lounges on her bed, and listens to the radio—sometimes to the BBC news, which she finds "both alarming and encouraging." The household is run by an efficient and eccentric fifty-nine-year-old woman from Silesia, known as Auntie. Her bedroom smells of ripe apples and dead mice, and contains a portrait of Hitler. Working under Auntie are two Ukrainian maids, Vera and Sonya, and a Pole named Vladimir, who has the letter "P" embroidered on his uniform.

Life in this little universe stumbles on. An aged schoolmaster, Dr. Wagner, sweet-natured and a bit of a bore, comes every day to tutor young Peter. ("His beard made him look like someone you felt you knew.") Katharina takes the carriage into Mitkau, to get some new books, and to spend time with her friend Felicitas, who is pregnant. Peter builds a snowman, which "bore a certain resemblance to the Führer and Chancellor of the Third Reich." Opposite the Georgenhof is a new housing development, built in 1936, whose unofficial deputy mayor is a man named Drygalski, a jackbooted Party member with a Hitler mustache. Bitter, full of petit-bourgeois resentment and genuine grief (his son died fighting in Poland), Drygalski is suspicious of the entitled and aloof Globig clan, and has been watching them for years. The Globigs, in turn, laugh at him, as a jumped-up local tyrant. And there is the politically defiant Mitkau

priest, Pastor Brahms, who is revealed to be part of an underground resistance group: "The pastor . . . was a doctrinarian who sometimes, when something like extra sausage was being considered, unexpectedly came out with very old-fashioned principles."

A dark finale is building, barometrically. A series of unexpected visitors jolt the Georgenhof world; they are harbingers of a general exodus that will eventually include the Globigs. A political economist (and avid stamp collector) is on his way to Mitkau, and takes shelter for the night. He asks his hosts if they saw the fires burning last night. (He also steals a stamp.) He's a liberal; a more conservative guest is a violinist who has been entertaining the troops, and is trying to get to Danzig, where her father lives. She disapproves of Vladimir's bringing in firewood—haven't we been forbidden to get too familiar with people like this?—and thinks the strength of the German people is "inexhaustible." Still, she asks her hosts if they possess hunting guns, in order to defend themselves when the time comes. When the members of the household warily discuss the "incautious" Pastor Brahms, they mention the words "concentration camp," but in hushed tones.

Kempowski gives us a hundred pages of this steady pressure-building—delicately achieved, with a constantly flickering humor—until the barometer breaks. The event that bundles the Globig family out of their house and into the general German experience is precipitated by Pastor Brahms. He asks Katharina if she will house, for a single night, a political refugee, a man on the run. Kempowski's handling of this episode displays all his deep talents as a novelist—his impartial hospitality to many different perspectives, his shrewd comprehension of his characters' solipsism, the impurity of their heroism. Katharina, elegant, passive, drifting through an unhappy marriage, is far from heroic. She doesn't give the pastor an immediate response but goes home and struggles with her hesitancy and fear. When she finally agrees to do it, she is not sure why, and feels that "for a few seconds she became another person." A vaguely felt moral imperative conspires with her craving for excitement. "I felt a hot thrill of alarm run down my spine" are the words she

imagines she'll use about her adventure once it is over.

The refugee, Erwin Hirsch, is a Jew from Berlin, and has been hiding from his persecutors for four years. Katharina tells no one else in the house; Hirsch spends the night, and most of the next day, safely ensconced inside the refuge. Kempowski treats the encounter with an almost uncanny neutrality. Katharina listens to Hirsch's stories, and is by turns curious, sympathetic, defensive, perhaps even bored by his repetitiousness. At one moment, she and Hirsch look at a map to see how close the Russians are:

What kept the Red Army from striking a blow? They bent over a map, and realized that the Red Army was less than a hundred kilometres away, ready for the final leap.

Should he wait for them or go to meet them? That was the question. But in this cold weather? "If I'd stayed in Berlin . . ."

Go to meet the Russians? Put his hands up, saying, "I'm a Jew!" But suppose they made short work of him, called him a spy and shot him. Or said, "A Jew? So what? Anyone can say that, and we have enough Jews of our own."

One reason that Kempowski's interrogative prose has a strange air of detachment is that the words have indeed detached themselves from the characters. Two people bend over the map, each with different anxieties, but who is thinking these thoughts about the Russians? Hirsch, Katharina, Kempowski, or all three? Most of "All for Nothing" is written in free indirect discourse, which is to say that the novelist's prose closely identifies itself with the perspective and the language of a particular character. But here the questions appear to be voiced by a chorus. The effect is a kind of uncertain omniscience, which allows the novelist not only to move easily among his characters but to blend their thoughts, when need be, into a collective anxiety. It's a modern epic style. (The Albanian novelist Ismail Kadare uses a similar method in his great Second World War epic, "Chronicle in Stone," which is set in a city under bombardment, in order to do the same thing: to voice a general anxiety.)

Katharina gambles—for the sake of excitement, really—and loses. Hirsch is later picked up by the authorities, and incriminates her. The police arrive; Drygalski gets to stomp around the Georgenhof, the fine old house having confirmed all his blackest suspicions. And Katharina,



beautiful and blank, is taken off to prison. But notice how calmly, with what cold-eyed generosity, Kempowski studies his characters' very different responses to this disaster. Any event, he seems to say, is always radically privatized by those it strikes. We all hoard our own investments in reality; those investments are generally ignoble, but always particular and individual. Katharina is, at first, dazed, unhurried, and appears not to take her arrest very seriously. The detective who shows up at the Georgenhof finds the whole thing a little awkward, because he's married to Katharina's friend Felicitas (who sends her love). The Hesse family, guests who have been staying with the Globigs, care only about their own survival: they ask Drygalski if their official travel permit has arrived. "I wish we hadn't come here," Frau Hesse says.

And the two Ukrainian maids? They are impressed by Katharina's bravery; they didn't think she had it in her. "But fancy running such risks for a lousy Jew. The women cried, and kept telling stories of all the things that had happened to them. It was a long time since they'd had chocolate to eat." Monstrous, we think, that chocolate could be more important to them than Katharina's fate, let alone Hirsch's. But they are crying because the mistress of the house has been arrested, and now they surely see the homelessness that lies ahead for them: "There has to be a place where you feel you belong." Kempowski is doing nothing more than showing us that most people quite reasonably think of themselves first. Chocolate is just the novelistic detail that beautifully concentrates this truth.

Walter Kempowski, who was born in 1929 and died in 2007, was a lifelong investigator of this kind of private relativism. He was born into a prosperous ship-owning family, in the Baltic port of Rostock, which was almost obliterated by British bombing in 1942. His father was killed during the final days of the war, fighting the Russians in East Prussia. In an introduction to "All for Nothing," the German writer Jenny Erpenbeck notes that the fifteen-year-old Kempowski witnessed the arrival in Rostock of German refugees from East Prussia. (She adds that one of the last boats to bring them there belonged to

the Kempowski family.) Walter was soon a victim of the Cold War, too. After working for the American Army of Occupation in Wiesbaden, he was accused of espionage by the Soviet authorities, and sentenced, along with his brother, to twenty-five years in a labor camp. Kempowski served eight years in Bautzen prison (which eventually passed from Soviet into East German control). Like Dostoyevsky in his Siberian prison camp, Kempowski in Bautzen encountered the stories of his compatriots, and committed himself to telling them, both in fictional and in documentary form. Alongside his many novels, he began to publish books of oral history, dedicated to retrieving some of the neglected and even unspeakable private experiences of Germans (and others) during the war years. "Did You Ever See Hitler?"—published in German in 1973; the English translation, by Michael Roloff, appeared in 1975—gathered the replies of two hundred and thirty ordinary Germans to the book's interrogatory title. Some are glancing and even lighthearted responses. A glazier remembers standing by Hitler's car. The Führer had just climbed out, "and then it seemed to me, because I stood right next to him, that he had farted." A teacher recalls him looking "like a little house painter with a hangover." A housewife relates how, as a teenager, she had screamed with joy as Hitler passed in the street, and written in her notebook, "This is the most beautiful day of my life!" Another woman, in one of the most memorable, most individual replies, says that she had an uncle who kept livestock. "After January 30, 1933"—when Hitler became Chancellor and his Brown Shirts took control of the country—"he killed all his brown chickens. That was still possible in those days." How the novelist must have cherished the stubborn oddity of that detail.

Kempowski's biggest project was a "collective diary" of the war years, published in ten volumes between 1993 and 2005, entitled "Das Echolot" ("Echo Soundings," in English). It runs to almost eight thousand pages, and brings together letters, diaries, speeches, and eyewitness accounts, in order to build what Kempowski called a "collage" of thousands of individual testimonies. The final volume, "Swansong 1945," was translated into English by Shaun Whiteside

and published in America in 2015, and gathers testimonies for just four days, starting with Hitler's fifty-sixth birthday, on April 20th. Here is the scrabble of historical experience before history has laid down its narrative paths. The reader pioneers a rough way through multiple texts, fragments, scraps of narrative, bits of oral history; we are supposed to feel the sheer density, and savage ironies, of diversity. The single day of April 20th, for instance, takes up nearly a hundred pages in the English translation, as we tack between accounts by the famous and the obscure, from politicians to writers, from minor officials to unimportant civilians. Goebbels gives a speech, full of loud lies, while in California Thomas Mann gets down to work on his new novel. Also on that day, a German woman waits to cross the Baltic to Copenhagen ("I wanted to get away at once. To go anywhere a person could live properly again"), while in Leipzig another German woman narrowly escapes being raped by a drunken American soldier. (She distracts the American by disingenuously asking him about President Roosevelt, who she knows has just died: "He sat on the ground in the middle of the courtyard and sobbed. . . . The dead president had saved me.") Meanwhile, a forced laborer from Ukraine, working in Hamburg, is treated charitably by her camp commander, and, at Bergen-Belsen, a British lieutenant writes, "It was the most appalling sight I have ever seen or indeed ever will see."

"Swansong 1945" is a shattering experience; it shatters history, so that each single shard cuts deeply. It also offers a lesson in the disorienting arrhythmias of simultaneity: Thomas Mann is at work in sunny Pacific Palisades while survivors gasp for life in Bergen-Belsen; a woman is avoiding getting raped while a British soldier in northwest Germany writes quite cheerfully to his parents that they don't need to send him any more chocolate. ("We get plenty, thank you.") Historical injustice has causes and large forces, identifiable culprits and victims. But the moral injustice of the accident of temporality is hard to bear, because it is so arbitrary, as Auden noted in "Musée des Beaux Arts": while someone is suffering, someone else is "eating or opening a window or just walking dully along." The torturer is wicked, but the tortur-

er's horse is innocent, and needs to scratch "its innocent behind on a tree." Erpenbeck puts this eloquently in her introduction. Kempowski, she writes, "proposes his life's work as an antidote to the traumatic experiences of a wartime childhood, all that he was obliged to learn as a youth: that when bombs start falling, one building will be struck while another is spared, one fifteen-year-old boy will fall in battle while another survives, and one prisoner will know what he's in jail for while another may have been mistakenly arrested during the chaotic months following the end of the war."

"All for Nothing" immerses us in the scandal of this arbitrariness, so that we see the differences that make up a collective narrative. In "War and Peace," Tolstoy said that he was trying to write about "the unconscious swarmlike life of mankind," by breaking history into the smallest individual units. This is something the novel is supremely equipped to do, because it is the great form of interior inquiry, the form that listens for privacy; but also because the novel simultaneously pulls apart and pushes together a smallish "swarm" of characters. "All for Nothing" is more powerful than "Swansong 1945," not only because its fictionality feels as real as anything in Kempowski's oral history but because Kempowski's novel is a distillation, rather than a collage. Instead of thousands of different testimonies, we encounter a dozen or so lives, densely realized, and these dozen or so people must encounter one another, even if their meetings are only meetings between solipsists.

Anyway, what is solipsism in wartime but the selfishness of survival? Katharina was brave enough to take Hirsch in for the night, but Kempowski doesn't hesitate to let us know that "she had been glad to be rid of him, that was the truth." When Drygalski goes home and tells his wife about Katharina's arrest, he wants praise and approval and is angered when she merely remarks, "Poor woman, she didn't deserve that!" He leaves the room, slamming the door. Kempowski's sense of individuation, like Tolstoy's, is so radical that it extends even to animals. Late in the novel, when Auntie has joined the long journey westward, and is nearing the end of her endurance, she rests her head against the neck of the horse that has been pulling her carriage: "She would

have liked to shed tears, leaning against the horse's neck. But the gelding swished his tail and rolled his eyes. He might well be thinking: now what? Is the old girl going to make a nuisance of herself?"

Katharina's arrest, and the steady advance of the Russians, sends Peter, Auntie, Vladimir, and Vera onto the path west, along with thousands of others. The last hundred pages of the book achieve momentous power, an epic grandeur—carriages and carts, dead horses



frozen in icy lakes, Russian bombers above, French prisoners of war on the move. Dr. Wagner, who did not leave the Georgenhof with Peter, finds his young pupil on the road. A bomb falls, and Peter is "sprinkled with washing powder that had been blasted into the air." At a hostel, Peter and his teacher come across Felicitas, Katharina's pregnant friend. She is giving birth, "and half an hour later mother and child were both dead." She was always so funny, Peter says. Yes, Dr. Wagner replies: "Death takes us all just as we are."

The material is searing, but Kempowski maintains an atmosphere of detachment, speculation, and even humor. The hostel where Peter and Dr. Wagner stay is named for the eighteenth-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. Only a few pages after the death of Felicitas, Dr. Wagner is not thinking about the dead mother but is trying to recall anything cogent about Herder: "Didn't Herder have something wrong with his eyes? Maybe an ulcer? That was all he could remember about him just now." Quietly but insistently, Kempowski reminds us that we are reading a historical novel, written decades after the events by an ironizing contemporary. When the French P.O.W.s march past, he writes, "In the thick, driving snow the scene looked a little like 1812." Throughout the book, Kempowski quotes poems and cheery popular songs, often in deliberately awkward juxtaposition to the grav-

ity of the narrative. And he playfully repeats "Heil Hitler!," abrading the phrase with flippancy and overuse. Whenever Drygalski appears or leaves, the official command is cheekily slipped into the text: "When Drygalski finally left—Heil Hitler!—the whole household heaved a sigh of relief." But later in the book, when Peter, now homeless, is lining up at a pharmacy, the dread phrase begins to lose its power, as the war effort runs out of *its* power: "People were queuing outside the pharmacy—Heil Hitler—and it was some time before he could buy his toothbrush." Twenty-four pages later, Peter is back at the shop: "The pharmacy was sold out of liquorice. Heil Hitler!"

Kempowski's ironic control braces the novel against melodrama. And it gives the author a slight distance from his characters, so that he is not aligned too sympathetically with them. Most of them, with the exception of the brave and kindly Peter (the novelist's self-portrait), are morally mottled, not entirely heroic but not wholly wicked, either. The novelist presents them as they are, and then steps back a little, as if he were saying to the reader, "Don't confuse my novelistic sympathy with historical advocacy." We sense this necessary German anxiety when Erpenbeck, in her introduction, commends the novel's impartiality, reminding us that it is "in no way a work of nationalistic nostalgia" but, instead, "makes us feel the weight of these end times beyond all political affiliation." Kempowski's novel represents one of the culminating achievements of that postwar German self-reckoning, that political and literary renegotiation of the past that has produced important work by Heinrich Böll, Günter Grass, W. G. Sebald, and, lately, Erpenbeck herself. We know that such reckoning required a delicate calculus, "beyond all political affiliation." Sebald, in the lectures on the Allied bombing of German cities that he delivered in 1997 (later published under the title "On the Natural History of Destruction"), argued that the "national humiliation felt by millions in the last years of the war" was the reason that "no one, to the present day, has written the great German epic of the wartime and postwar periods." A little less than a decade later, but too late for poor Sebald, Walter Kempowski beautifully proved him wrong. ♦



## HEARD INSTINCT

*"You Were Never Really Here" and "A Quiet Place."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

The scariest thing about Joe (Joaquin Phoenix), in *"You Were Never Really Here,"* is not the violence that he deals in, merciless though it is, but the fact that so much of it is meted out with a hammer. Guns make a contribution, and he will use his forehead if necessary, but his reliance on the hammer is rivalled only by Thor's. At one

Samsonov), she is thirteen, and she is said to have fallen into evil hands. Votto would like her back, without involving the cops. He tells Joe how to treat the people who are holding Nina: "I want you to hurt them."

*"You Were Never Really Here,"* adapted from Jonathan Ames's short novel, is written and directed by Lynne



Joaquin Phoenix plays a contract killer in Lynne Ramsay's new film.

point, Joe slings it over his shoulder, like the Seven Dwarfs toting their pick-axes on the way back from the mine. Heigh-ho!

Joe is not your average Joe. He is a contract killer, and a cleaner-up of other people's messes. The business is low-grade; payments are made with an envelope of cash stuffed above a ceiling tile, and, at the end of a hard night's mayhem, Joe returns to the small house that he shares with his elderly mother (Judith Roberts). "Mom, I'm home," he says. One day, he receives a lucrative request from on high. Albert Votto (Alex Manette), a New York state senator, who is campaigning in a gubernatorial election, has a runaway daughter. Her name is Nina (Ekaterina

Ramsay. Her style, refined in films like *"Ratcatcher"* (1999) and *"We Need to Talk About Kevin"* (2011), is unignorable; the closeups are pathologically rapt, and the focus is not just on faces but on other regions of the body. Ramsay likes to make an audience work—planting clues instead of laying out a routine plot, and turning every spectator into a detective. In the new film, for instance, to whom do those twitching feet belong, and why is the bare-chested villain rearranging furniture in a doll's house? You need to know more, although maybe you'd rather not, given Ramsay's flair for ushering her characters into the dread realms of perversity and pain.

You could always try shutting your

eyes, but that won't help. It might even make things worse. Ordinary sounds are jacked up to a paranoid pitch; when Joe takes a jelly bean and squeezes it, there is a granular crunch, and his trudge along a dusty track is as resonant as the march of a platoon. If Ramsay ever tires of feature films about unhappy humans, she could surely make it big in documentaries about insects or mice. Thrown into the sonic mix, in *"You Were Never Really Here,"* is another fine score by Jonny Greenwood—an adjunct to his lush compositions for *"Phantom Thread,"* and significantly harsher on the nerves. The camera's doomy approach to a rack of hammers, in a hardware store, is greeted with a skittering of percussion and strings.

Some strains of this fearsome film, to be honest, feel overworked and arch. When Joe finds his white-haired mother sitting in front of the TV, for example, does it *have* to be showing *"Psycho"*? And how much baggage, exactly, can a person be expected to hump around? In one set of flashbacks, we see Joe as a boy, besieged by a cruel father; in another, we see a desert, and a kid being killed in front of U.S. soldiers. So, let's get this straight: Joe is a victim of child abuse, a veteran with post-traumatic stress, *and* a professional hit man. Also, his most tempting target, from first to last, is himself—in the opening minutes, his mouth sucks urgently at a plastic bag that he's wrapped around his head. And don't forget the woes of Nina, either. She is not merely missing but snared in the web of a trafficking network, trading in young girls, which stretches right up to the rafters of government, and whose mansion of vice is situated in midtown Manhattan. Of course it is.

Such excess, for Ramsay's many fans, is part of the deal. In *"Morvern Callar"* (2002), she tells the tale of two young women who work in a supermarket, get drunk, and grab a vacation in Spain—everyday stuff, except that one of them chops up the body of a deceased boyfriend and buries it, while mailing off the manuscript of his novel under her own name. You barely notice the nonsense, such is the hallucinatory grip of the filmmaking, and the same goes for *"You Were Never Really Here."* Whether Joe could actually ascend from

floor to floor of a building, say, felling each man he meets, matters less than the creepy cleverness of the framing, in which every hammer blow is captured, in black-and-white fuzz, by security cameras on the walls.

"You Were Never Really Here" is hard going: easy to revere, fascinating to explore, but nagging in its grimness and, were it not for the rooted presence of Joaquin Phoenix, difficult to believe in. His longish hair is tied at the back, his voice is a chewy mumble, and his beard would be the envy of any badger, although it's a while before you glimpse his face; as Joe walks away from a hit, near the start of the film, he wears a top with the hood pulled up. You stare at the processional menace of his gait and think of a boxer, heading for the ring in his robe. His arms are scarred as well as muscled, and his back is marked by a sizable welt. It's as though this man were no more than the sum of his sufferings, and viewers must decide whether Joe's care for his mother, or his bid to save Nina, is enough to redeem the ferocity of his crimes. In one extraordinary scene, he hangs in the cold waters of a lake, dressed in a suit and tie, with stones in his pockets, in the pose of the crucified Christ. The beauty of the image is beyond question, but might it be too beautiful to be true?

Say hello to the monsters in "A Quiet Place." Correction: wave hello to the monsters. Saying is not recommended. They are roughly the size of a horse, and they seem to have ravaged our planet, despite being blind. (In a

cunning touch, their awkward movements, at close quarters, resemble those of sightless old men with walking sticks.) They have ranks of needling teeth, but their special tool is their ears: giant sticky whorls like the horn of a windup gramophone, with the echoing depth of a seashell and the hint of an opening rose. From hundreds of yards away, they can pick up the faintest clink of a knife and fork, the beep of a toy, or normal human speech—enough to bring the beasts running, ready to let rip. In other words, do not weep; forget laughter; stifle all sneezes and yelps; and never, ever sing.

From this splendid premise John Krasinski has fashioned a robust and frightening fable of predation and survival, set in upstate New York. (Of the wider world we see nothing, except in the headlines of old newspapers.) In addition to directing, he plays the hero, Lee Abbott, who, with his wife, Evelyn (Emily Blunt), their daughter, Regan (Millicent Simmonds), and her younger brother, Marcus (Noah Jupe), are living the quiet life—and, whenever possible, the silent life—on a farm. They walk barefoot everywhere. Outside, the paths are softened and hushed with ashy soil; inside, any boards that don't creak have been daubed with paint, and the Abbotts must pick their way from one to the next, as if on stepping stones. Cooking is done beneath the floor, to prevent the clatter of pots and pans. If the family needs to chat, they do so in sign language, which they must have learned years ago, since Regan is deaf. The Abbotts used to be five in number, but they lost a child, and soon

they will be five again, because Evelyn is pregnant. You look at her blooming belly and think, What a swell story this is. How and where, out of interest, is she proposing to give birth, suppressing every shout and curse? And what about a newborn, for crying out loud?

"A Quiet Place" is a good companion for "You Were Never Really Here." Both movies, at ninety minutes or so, are fat-free. Both make use of closed-circuit TV. And both demand much of their teen-age actresses; the remarkable Simmonds, who is herself deaf, and who starred in "Wonderstruck," last year, makes a greater impact still in "A Quiet Place," as the indomitable Regan, with her secretive smile. Her hearing aid is vital to the plot, and, indeed, the whole saga is shaped around its sound design. You could say the same of Lynne Ramsay's film, but, when she heightens the volume, she is tensing Joe's world like a piano tuner tautening a string, and making his headspace ever less endurable. Noise, for her, strikes an existential note, whereas Krasinski, working in the groove of a genre, with surprises to spring, gives the Abbotts something more pressing to fret about than the state of their souls. That is why, of the two tales, "A Quiet Place" is not just more enjoyable but, alien invaders notwithstanding, more coherently plausible, revelling in the logic of well-grounded terror. Besides, if these folk on the farm talk to one another, they will die. You can't get more existential than that. ♦

#### NEWYORKER.COM

Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Tom Toro, must be received by Sunday, April 15th. The finalists in the April 2nd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the April 30th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).*

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

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### THE FINALISTS

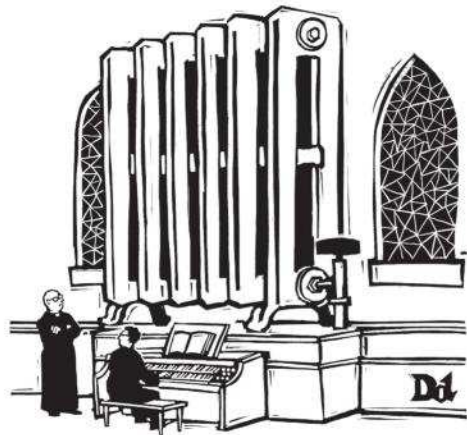


*“Bad news. They found the proof in the pudding.”*  
Grant Johnson, Louisville, Ky.

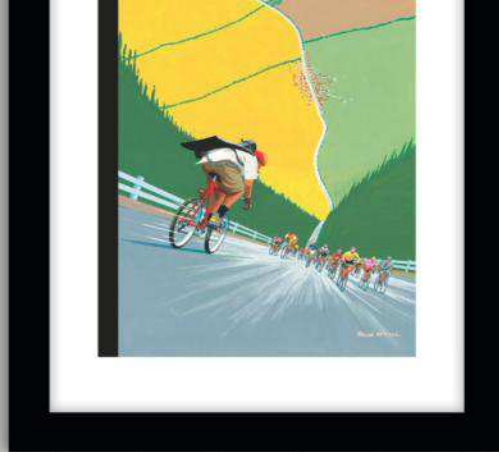
*“You and I both know salt is the real killer.”*  
Anne Reiner, New York City

*“They’ve got you on prix fixing.”*  
Dick Hartzell, New York City

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“I see the radiator’s Baroque again.”*  
Alan C. Duncan, Cleveland, Ohio



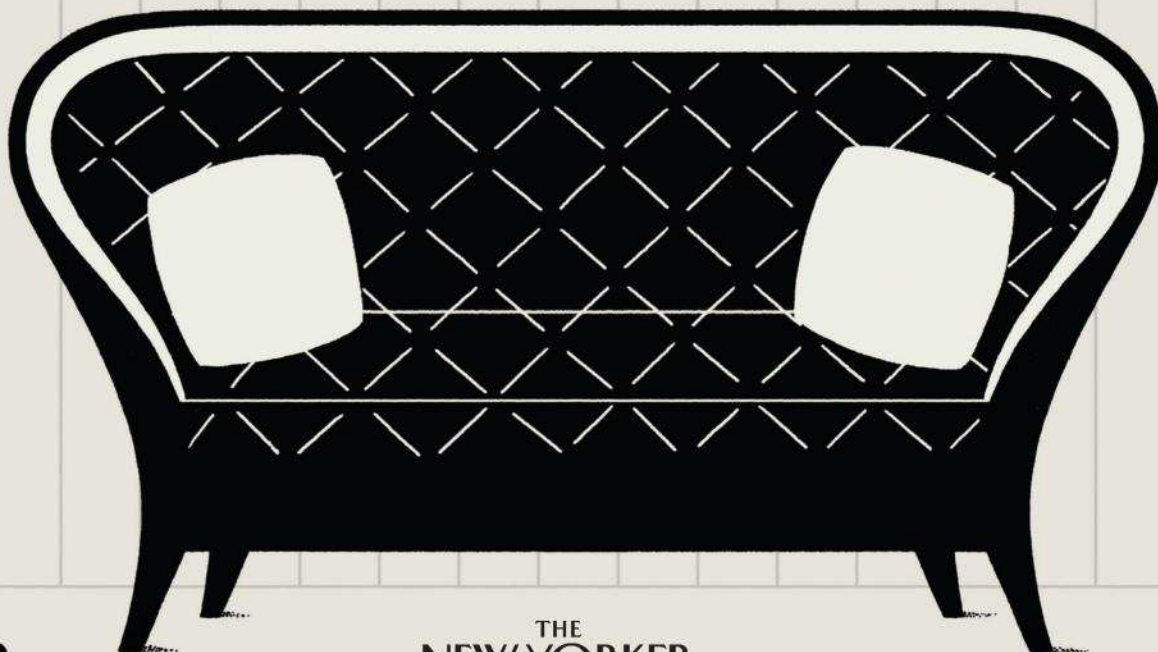
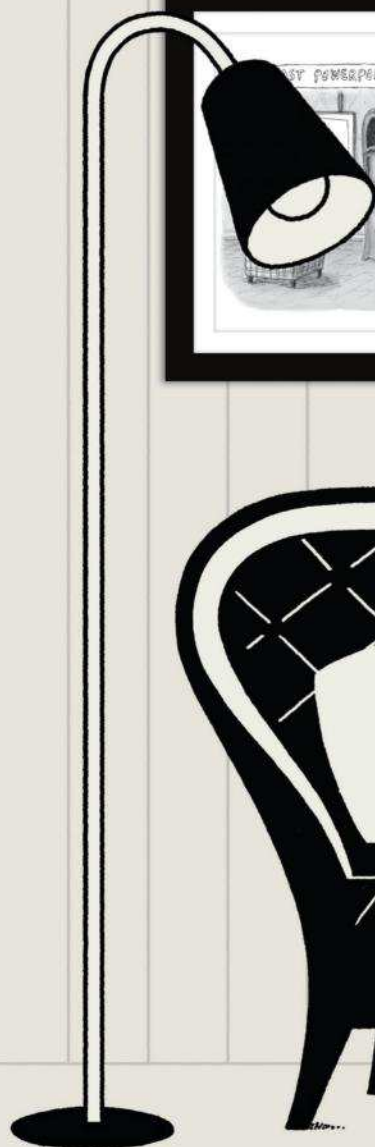
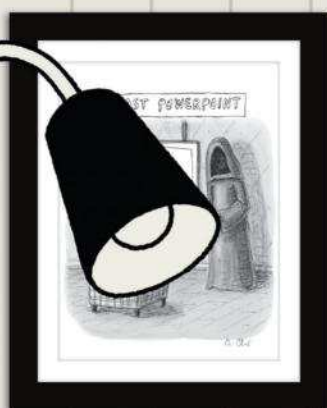
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